

Enticed

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Enticed

by [ObsidianPen](#)

Summary

Harry Potter, the A/B/O version.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

An Upsetting Year

“Quiet down, now, quiet down!”

The classroom was nearly at capacity, what with the first-years from all four of the bloody houses being jammed inside. The Ravenclaws were clamoring for the desks in the front, far too eager for Severus’s liking; the Hufflepuffs were occupying the space in the middle, laughing and looking altogether too cheerful; and the Gryffindors and the Slytherins were casting each other judgmental stares, going to opposite sides of the room as though the entire seating arrangement had been pre-arranged.

“I said quiet, please!” Pomona shouted, as it was her own house which was being the loudest. The Gryffindors may have been a boisterous group in general, but Severus could at least acknowledge that if Minerva was good at one thing as an instructor, it was her ability to make her students fall silent with a single look.

Severus was even better at this. He bored down on his Slytherin first-years with eyes narrowed and brows furrowed. A practiced glower. Several of them lowered their heads on pure instinct.

“Right, very good,” Pomona said once the Hufflepuffs finally listened and quieted themselves. Severus surveyed the students from where he stood in the corner, his gaze distasteful and imposing.

He *hated* this lecture.

He hated it, he had always hated it, and today, with this particular group of students, he hated it more than ever.

Draco Malfoy was leaning back in his chair, examining his fingernails and looking bored already. Hermione Granger was bouncing in her seat, having claimed a chair in the front alongside the Ravenclaws—though on the Gryffindor side of the Hufflepuff border—and directly behind her...

Gods, he looked *just* like his arrogant, idiotic father.

...Well.

Severus shifted to the left, moving so that the lights from above cast a glare across his glasses in just the right place, obscuring his eyes.

There.

Just like his father.

“Now. As you are all aware, seeing as it has been posted in your common rooms since the first day of classes, this is to be a lecture introducing you to Magical Dynamics and Maturity.” Pomona brandished her wand over the chalkboard, and the words ‘Magical Dynamics and Maturity’ appeared along the top. “For those of you whose parents are witches and wizards, this will no doubt be a topic which is very familiar to you.”

Draco yawned theatrically, and the two overly large classmates he considered friends on either side of him sniggered. Severus shot them a warning look, and their jaws clicked shut.

“However, this does not include all of us, and a proper overview from multiple, outside perspectives is always beneficial.”

Hence this lecture being *mandatory*, Snape thought with despair—for both the students and the Heads of Houses. What he wouldn’t give to be literally anywhere else.

“Now, who here can tell me what the three basic categories of magical signatures are?”

Granger’s hand immediately shot up in the air, ahead of a slew of Ravenclaws. Severus hardly suppressed an eyeroll—it was only the second week of classes, and already she was an insufferable know-it-all. “Yes, Miss Granger?”

“The three categories are Alphas, Betas, and Omegas. Most witches and wizards are Betas, while around ten percent of males present as Alphas, and five percent of females present as Omegas.”

“Very good, Miss Granger! You’ve gone and answered my next question, too, before I could even ask it. Take five points for Gryffindor.”

Granger smiled. The Ravenclaws glared at her, looking as though they’d just been cheated out of a grand opportunity.

“As Miss Granger just told us, these are the three categories—Alpha, Beta, Omega.” The words each appeared on the board, one next to another. “Now. Magical maturity is different from physical maturity. It happens sometime after you have undergone puberty, the same as

muggles do. This means that the average age for this occurrence—often referred to as ‘presenting’—is usually between fourteen and sixteen. Always before seventeen, when you officially come of age. The most common time for this change is spring or early summer, though it can happen at any time. Females tend to present a bit earlier than males. For betas, which will be most of you, this is a relatively easy transition, so we’ll spend a fair amount of time going over this.”

She stepped aside, allowing Minerva to take over. Professor McGonagall did not share Professor Sprout’s merry disposition nor her easy smile; her lips were pressed into a thin line and her expression stern. “Magic is something which is often unpredictable and uncontrollable, yet as you grow older, it is most certainly perceivable. Every witch and wizard has a different aura, much like everyone has a unique appearance and scent. Some of them will be attractive to you. Some of them will not.”

Granger’s hand shot up in the air again—apparently, the prompt of a question was not necessary for her to be a nuisance. “Yes, Miss Granger?”

“How can you tell?” she asked, breathless. Then she blushed, realizing that this was more than likely an awkward question. Unfortunately, she was unable to stop herself from elaborating. “I mean—we’ve been in the castle for over a week now, and I can’t tell at all what any of you...”

Her voice trailed off then, lowering her arm and looking bashful. “That’s because you, just like nearly everyone else in this room, is magically immature, Miss Granger,” Minerva explained. “While you are still young, such nuances will be beyond you. In fact, being able to perceive magical signatures is how most people learn they are going through the change. It’s difficult to explain, but you will definitely know it when it happens.”

“You said it’s like smell?” one of the Hufflepuffs asked, her nose wrinkled. A few others giggled.

“Raise your hand next time, Abbot!” Pomona chided.

“It is a combination of all the senses,” Minerva went on, looking unaffected. “Smell is a part of it—you’ll notice scents associated with individuals you had never picked up on before, as well as visual subtleties and another, more powerful sense that is very difficult to describe until you experience it. It is the perception of magic, which

feels somewhat like a magnetic pull towards or push away from someone else, depending on your own magic's inclination.

"Now, I suppose some of you are wondering why this may be." Minerva paused, her jaw visibly tightening. "This is magic at its most primal, basic level. While we, as sophisticated and evolved human beings, have manipulated magical energy into very controllable forms in many ways—through the use of wands, for example—this is a form we have never been able to completely control. It is magic's way of guiding us towards the most appropriate partner in order to produce healthier offspring."

There was a beat of silence before the inevitable snickering ensued. "Silence," Severus hissed from his corner in the shadows. It immediately ceased. Minerva shot him a quick look as if to say, *I could have done that*. Severus smirked.

"Ninety percent of the males in this room and ninety-five percent of the females will present as a beta," she continued briskly. "A beta's magic is the most malleable and easily controlled, and their presentation is fairly straight forward."

Minerva pointed her wand at the board, and a few bullet points appeared in the center, under 'Beta'. "Heightened sense of smell and sharper vision, light fever, and, ultimately, the ability to perceive the magical signatures of others. For betas, this all happens very quickly, often in the course of a single day. It's not uncommon for a beta to go to sleep feeling slightly off, only to awake and find that their senses have changed. It will be abundantly clear to you, then, who other, presented betas are... as well as the alphas and the omegas. The three different categories have very distinct... flavors, for lack of a better word. Again, it is a perception that is difficult to explain until you have experienced it. Male betas tend to feel a stronger pull towards omega females, and female betas tend to feel a stronger pull towards alpha males. Yes, Miss Abbot?"

The same Hufflepuff who had spoken out before had raised her hand. "But betas usually end up together, don't they, professor?" she asked. "Why is that the case, if betas feel more of a pull towards omegas and alphas?"

"Because alphas and omegas almost always end up together," Minerva answered emotionlessly. "It's not unusual for an alpha to be with a beta—it's fairly common, in fact—but it's almost unheard of for an omega to pair with a beta. This could be explained simply by an

individual's preference, as magical attraction does *not* mean mental compatibility, but it is truthfully more about percentages. There are more alphas than there are omegas. Omegas, therefore, have the ability to be more selective, and will nearly always prefer an alpha to a beta."

No matter how illogical, ridiculous, and terrible that choice may be, Snape thought with bitter contemptuousness.

"Regardless... As I said earlier, beta magic is the most malleable, meaning that their inclinations are based more on the individual's abilities. Omegas, however, have a strong tendency towards defensive and restorative magic, whereas alphas lean more towards power-based spells. Yes, Miss Brown?"

"Is it true that every dark wizard to ever exist was an alpha?" she asked in a hushed voice, glancing warily towards the Slytherins. They returned her apprehensive look with haughty expressions of their own.

Minerva sighed. "It is a troubling statistic, yes," she said. "But that certainly doesn't mean that all alpha males are infatuated by the dark arts. Look at our Headmaster, for instance. Professor Dumbledore is an alpha male, and he is about as far from a dark wizard as you can get."

Most of the students murmured in agreement; some of the boys even looked relieved. Draco muttered something under his breath to his friends, who chuckled in amusement. "However, alpha males do tend to take up positions of power and rank, while omega females have a strong tendency to take on more... traditionally feminine roles," she finished vaguely. "But again, this is a *tendency*, not a rule. There have been omega females who have gone on to be aurors and politicians, and there have been alpha males who have never worked at all."

Severus didn't miss the way her eyes flickered to Draco, no doubt thinking of his aristocratic, alpha male father... who had not, in fact, worked a day in his life.

Not on paper, at least.

"I heard that all the darkest wizards were not only alpha males, but *Slytherins*," said a Gryffindor girl whom Severus did not yet know the name of. He opened his mouth to snarl something at her, but Minerva spoke before he could.

"That is just another stereotype," she said curtly. "Yes, there have

been more dark wizards that have come from Slytherin, but there had been practitioners of the dark arts which have come from the other houses as well."

"Not Hufflepuff!" The boy who shouted it actually stood, he was suddenly so passionate and indignant. "There's never been a dark wizard to come from Hufflepuff!"

"That's because Hufflepuff never produces alpha males," Draco drawled loudly, causing the Slytherin half of the room to laugh.

But the boy only puffed his chest out further. "Not true!" he yelled, pointing at Draco dramatically. "Cedric Diggory is an alpha male, ask anyone who's presented. And there's not a chance that *he* could ever go dark!"

"All right, Mr. Macmillan, that's quite enough out of you. Sit down." Pomona tapped her wand against her leg, looking as annoyed as Pomona ever could. Reluctantly, the boy took his seat again.

Severus decided it was high time he speak.

"It would seem there are some serious... *misconceptions*," he began, sweeping to the center of the room and all but shoving Minerva aside. He paused, taking a moment to relish the tense atmosphere that only he, the Potions Master, was capable of creating.

"No doubt, all of you are sitting there hoping that you will present as alphas and omegas. That you'll be *special*," Snape drawled, his eyes flickering down at Potter judgmentally. The boy met his glower unblinkingly, but Severus could see the anxiety brimming in his eyes. Severus looked away, feeling smug. "Perhaps you've read some riveting article in *Witch Weekly* about some omega witch's whirlwind love affair with her charming, alpha male. Perhaps you've heard stories of the most powerful wizards in our history, and have noticed that they were nearly all domineering, formidable alpha males, and you hope to have such fame for yourself..."

The students' eyes were all wide, almost fearful, and riddled with varying degrees of nervousness. "This is a *delusion*," he continued in a dark voice. "To be an alpha or an omega is to be ruled by your magical tendencies, to be forced to go through a far more painful change. Alphas and omegas are doomed to take potions which suppress their desires, they are forced to live a life that is ruled by uncontrollable instinct rather than clear *logic*. Not only that, but they are somewhat limited in their abilities. Alphas may cast powerful

curses with ease, but you would be hard-pressed to find an alpha male who could conjure a patronus... Likewise, while omegas are quick to learn light magic, powerful dark magic, such as unforgiveable curses, would likely lie beyond their reach. They exist in extremes. Being a beta may not be nearly so romanticized, but it is a life a freedom. You should all hope to be so lucky.”

It hardly mattered that he had just mentioned several things which first-years were unfamiliar with; they all looked distressed by his tone alone.

“Painful?” Draco, one of the few who already knew most of what Snape had just said, spoke without raising his hand. Evidently, the only word which struck a chord with him was *painful*, and he suddenly looked alarmed—rightfully so. His father was an alpha and his mother an omega. There was therefore a much stronger likelihood that he too would be an alpha. Such things tended to run in families. “What do you mean, painful?”

“Hand, Mr. Malfoy,” Snape hissed warningly.

Draco thrust his hand in the air. “What do you mean, *painful*?” he repeated, his voice rising. “Sir?” he added sharply.

“Perhaps I should answer this, Professor Snape.”

Severus nearly missed him—which was saying something, as his colleague’s magic was brimming with a weighty deepness. The stout form of Filius looked up at him, a strained smile on his face. Severus said nothing, only nodded and stalked back to his corner in the shadows, where he continued to stare daggers at his least favorite students.

Filius cleared his throat and pulled out his wand, summoning a stool over to himself to stand on so that the large group could see him clearly. “The change for alphas and omegas is very different than that of betas,” he began, speaking to the room at large. Draco’s hand slowly lowered to his side, but his expression remained unnerved.

“For alpha males, which will be...” he paused, eyes darting about the many faces, “about five of you, or so, the change will be uncomfortable. Is anyone familiar with the term rut?”

Unsurprisingly, Granger’s hand shot up in the air. Severus scowled. What was wrong with this eleven-year-old, muggle-born girl? She should have been one of the least informed students in the room.

“It is when an alpha male becomes physically aggressive in order to copulate,” she answered without blinking, shockingly unshy now. Yet then she frowned. “But, sir, I thought that only occurred when they were around omegas in heat?”

“You are quite right, Miss Granger. Take another five points for Gryffindor. Yes, generally, alpha males only go into ruts because they are triggered. Being near an omega in heat for a prolonged period of time will do this. However, that is not the case when you are young, and it is the last step of the process when an alpha male is first going through the change.”

He pointed his wand at the board... and a well-rendered, anatomically correct drawing of a *penis* appeared.

The giggling happened right on cue. “Quiet,” Minerva snapped, though Severus had just opened his mouth to say the same. He shot her a look as though to say, *I could have done that*. She smirked.

Horrid, bitter old woman.

“A male beta will have normal male genitalia,” Filius went on, speaking as though no giggling had ever occurred. “An alpha male, however, will begin to develop an extra part to their anatomy in the days leading up to their presentation. This is called a *bulbus glandis*, or a knot.”

He flicked his wand, and there they were: two, swollen glands at the base of his line-drawing representation of a *cock*. Severus wished he could do what half the students were doing and hide his face in his hands, but he had a reputation to uphold. He stood as still as a statue, choosing instead to glower at those feeble enough to blush.

“The knot is a part of the male anatomy which causes the alpha male to become physically attached to the omega female in question during copulation.” Filius tossed one hand flippantly, like that was not such an unsettling statement. “Anyway, that is how alpha males will know they are soon to present, as the *bulbus glandis* will form. Which is all well and good, because then you have plenty of time to be prepared for the next stages of the change... which are not at all pleasant, admittedly.”

The males in the room all squirmed in their seats, and Draco’s face paled significantly. Snape couldn’t help but find it amusing that Lucius and Narcissa had failed to tell their son about this part. They really did coddle Draco far too much. “Once the knot has fully formed, alpha

male presentation happens in the form of a rut. These initial ruts are rather dramatic and occur without the presence of an omega's magic experiencing a heat. They can, however, thankfully, be controlled... thanks in large part to our very own Headmaster."

He pointed at the board again, and the offensive drawing of an alpha male's anatomy vanished. In its place were the words *Masculum Reprimunt*. "This is the name of the repressing potion which is used to prevent ruts. There was a much older and less efficient version invented in the 1800's, but Albus Dumbledore himself improved upon this elixir at a young age in 1902, as well as the omega version, *Femina Reprimunt*, a few years later—more on omegas in a moment. As for you, future alphas, listen to my next words very carefully."

Flitwick's generally benign expression became cold, sinister. The children might not have been able to consciously perceive the alpha magic radiating off him, but Severus could. He and Minerva exchanged a rare and uncharacteristic glance, in which they both felt mutually uneasy.

Such was the effect of an alpha male who wanted to intimidate.

Subconsciously, it worked on the children as well. They shrunk in their seats, their eyes widening. "The symptoms begin as muscle pains," he said, and as he spoke, the symptoms as words began to appear on the board. "Then, sleeplessness, and general unease. You will find that you can't stay still for more than a moment. After that, you will develop a very short temper. The slightest thing will make your magic act out on its own. I, personally, caused the Ravenclaw table to break in half because one of my dorm mates had the audacity to ask me to pass the pumpkin juice when I wasn't quite done with it yet."

A few students laughed feebly, but some were quicker on the uptake than others. "You're an alpha male, professor?" that pompous Hufflepuff shouted bluntly.

His look of surprised was shared by many others throughout the room. Filius's responding smile was more like an animal baring its teeth. "Size is no indication of power, Mr. Macmillan," he said quietly.

An uncomfortable moment of silence in which Mr. Macmillan looked like he wanted to run from the room.

"The very moment you know that you are going through the change, go to the *hospital wing*," Filius continued. "As in, once you start to have

muscle pains, after you have noticed the development of the *bulbus glandis*. Do not embarrass yourself by waiting until you have begun to act a fool. Nothing would be more dramatic or terrible than to have an alpha male going through a rut right in the middle of breakfast. It hasn't happened in over a hundred years. There is no reason that it *should* happen. *Do not break that record.*"

His words were spoken with such finality that no one seemed to breathe afterwards. Neville Longbottom looked like he may have become petrified, his body went so rigid in his chair.

Size was no indication of power, indeed.

But then Filius was smiling casually again. "Now, unfortunately, we don't have an omega female on staff," he said, folding his hands in front of him. "But we know the symptoms well enough, and they are even more obvious than an alpha male's, despite the lack of a physical manifestation."

Filius then stepped aside, wisely allowing a woman to talk about the change that would plague perhaps three of the students in the room, if that many. Pomona moved forward. "The symptoms of presenting as an omega are very obvious, but you will not have the days' worth of warning that alpha males do. It begins as hyperawareness—adrenaline coursing through your veins, your pulse racing without reason. It feels like fear."

The girls certainly looked fearful at *that*. Pomona carried on, and her words appeared in script as bullet points under the word 'Omega' on the board. "Several hours after that begins, you will start to feel dizzy, unable to focus properly. Then, finally, you will become feverish, overly so. Your body will be very hot to the touch. This is the beginning of your first heat.

"To reinforce what Professor Flitwick has said on the matter, please, the second you feel a sense of overwhelming anxiety that arises without a cause, *go to the hospital wing*. Heats can be preventatively suppressed, but they cannot be stopped once they are started. And an omega's first heats are highly... uncomfortable."

Granger's hand shot up in the air. "I'm sorry," she said, apologizing for speaking before being called on but not stopping regardless, "but I've read a bit on these, and... and I'm afraid I don't fully understand them. Heats."

"Heats are when omega females are most fertile," Pomona explained

curtly. “It is their magic manifesting in a way which is very, *very* attractive to alpha males—debilitatingly so, in fact. Which is why it is so very, *very* important that you report to the hospital wing at once if you feel you may be going through the change. An omega heat going unchecked could trigger a devastating chain reaction. Again, such a thing has not happened in over a hundred years. Do not allow it to happen with you.”

Her eyes roved over all the girls, who fidgeted under her accusatory stare. Filius cleared his throat and spoke next. “In alpha males, sporadic ruts will continue for the next two to three years, about once every three months. The symptoms are always the same, though, so it’s simple enough to prevent. A repressing elixir will be provided for you at the hospital wing, as well as something to relieve the muscle pain. After that, ruts only occur when an omega in heat is nearby for a prolonged period of time.”

“What about heats?” Granger clapped a hand over her mouth. “Sorry, sir,” she muttered afterwards.

Perhaps it was her sincerely frightened expression, but none of the staff could reprimand her for speaking out of turn. Even more surprising was that it was he, Severus, who answered first.

“Heats do not stop,” he murmured, feeling the slightest twinge of something resembling pity towards omega females. “They only become more regular as time goes on. Omega females often need to take repressing elixirs every month for most of their lives... and the potion is not an inexpensive one, either.”

“Well that’s not fair!” Granger shouted, and the other girls shared her affronted disposition. “Shouldn’t that elixir be provided by—by healthcare, or something? Don’t wizards have a healthcare system?”

“This is not an *ethics* class, Miss Granger,” Snape said, though he was secretly impressed that a first-year was thinking about things on such a libertarian level already. She had no *idea* the political mess of biases that existed within the wizarding world when it came to omegas. “Five points from Gryffindor for speaking out of turn.”

She glowered and opened her mouth to say something else, but the Weasley boy elbowed her warningly, and she held her tongue.

“Not that that’s anything you’ll need to worry about while in school!” Pomona said hurriedly, her smile pained. She shot Severus a quick and venomous look for having brought it up in the first place. “Repressing

elixirs are provided for students, of course. In fact, taking them is mandatory.”

“Is there really no other way to stop a heat?” This time it was a girl from his own house, Parkinson, who had spoken. “There’s no spell or something that will work?”

“No,” Pomona answered somberly, and it seemed no one cared about hand-raising anymore, at this point. “Unfortunately, there is not.”

“What did omega witches *do*, before the invention of suppressing potions?” asked a tiny Ravenclaw girl.

“This is not a history lesson, either, Miss Turpin,” Snape drawled. “In fact, I believe that this entire lecture has already gone on painfully long enough. This was meant to be a simple introduction. None of you will present until, at the very earliest, your third year... At which point, we shall deal with the students in our houses on an individual level. Seeing betas through the change is easy enough... it is the *rest* of you that will cause all the problems.”

He cast Potter a judgmental look again, already detesting the future trouble a presented Harry James Potter would create. His father had been horrid enough *unpresented*, and his arrogance had swollen to unfathomable proportions after he’d gone through the change and emerged as an alpha male.

Minerva noticed the glare and cleared her throat, drawing everyone’s attention away from Severus to her.

Horrid, bitter old woman.

“Betas often go through the change on their own, as it is a simple transition, but it is still required that you meet with your Head of House formally after you have. Alphas and omegas meet with their Heads after they’ve gone to the hospital wing and Madam Pomfrey has seen to it that their heats and ruts have been suppressed.”

“Marvelous conclusion, Professor,” Snape drawled, causing her lips to tighten into a thin line. “Any questions?” he then asked, addressing the group of too many children in a voice that suggested nothing would displease him more than if they raised their hands.

Naturally, Granger did just that. The same glower that made all his other students lower their heads and avert their gazes had no effect whatsoever on this bushy-haired phenomenon. “Yes, Miss Granger...?”

“I read that it’s possible for a female to present as an alpha, and a male to present as an omega,” she said, her eyes shining with curiosity.

She stared. Snape scowled. “That was not a *question*, Miss Granger.”

“So how does that work? Sir?”

The first-years all leaned forward in their seats, their interest tangible. Severus sighed heavily and pinched the bridge of his nose. Of *course* Granger would be the one to bring it up.

They never planned to cover this topic, but someone *always* asked, so they *always* had to. Severus didn’t answer, just stalked back to his corner in the shadows, deciding that one of his colleagues could handle this. He’d already reached his threshold for patience.

“It is possible, technically, yes,” Pomona replied, once more sending Severus a distasteful look as though he had asked the question. “But it is a very, *very* rare occurrence.”

“I read that the odds of a female presenting as alpha are about a quarter of a percent,” Granger gushed, and Severus wondered if she only asked the question so that she could regurgitate whatever book she’d read on the matter. “And that those odds are even less for a male to present as omega.”

“Yes,” Pomona agreed uneasily. “That would be correct.”

“Why would that happen, ma’am?” Mr. Macmillan had clearly never heard of such anomalies before. He looked petrified. “What does that mean, to be an *omega male*?”

The students all began murmuring to each other. Pomona sighed, but it was Filius who responded. “Everyone calm down. As Miss Granger has just told us, the odds of such a thing happening are extremely rare. But, since it was brought up, I shall attempt to explain in as simple a manner as I can.”

He pointed his wand at the board, and it cleared at once—the words ‘Alpha Female’ and ‘Omega Male’ appearing there instead... and then, underneath that, ‘Delta’.

“Alpha females and omega males—sometimes referred to as deltas—are exceptionally uncommon, and somewhat of a mystery. Genetically speaking, they make no sense. They don’t reproduce, and yet, they

exist in even further extremes than their female and male counterparts. That is to say, an alpha female experiences ruts that cause her to be even wilder than that of an alpha male, and their tendencies towards dark and powerful magic are even stronger. Omega males go through heats that are even more magically seductive than female omegas, and their tendencies to be skilled at light magic are even higher.”

“Heats!” Macmillan looked so horrified it was comical, like he feared he was going through the change of a delta right then and there. “Males going through heats! That sounds bloody terrible!”

“*More* seductive than an omega female’s?” Draco shouted, looking nearly as distraught as Macmillan. “You mean—you mean an alpha male would be attracted magically to *another male*?”

“Indeed,” Filius answered impassively, causing the boys to all pale dramatically. “An alpha male who had never thought another male to be attractive a day in their lives would find an omega male in heat desirable. Again, no one truly understands why this is the case. Genetically, it is illogical. These deltas are highly attractive to the same sex, and are personally attracted to that same sex as well—alpha females to omega females, omega males to alpha males—and yet, this results in no offspring, so that magic cannot be passed down to a future generation. Which is a great shame, really, as historically, these individuals have tended to be brilliant, influential, and extremely powerful.”

“Like who, sir?” Granger was tilted so far forward in her seat it seemed she may soon fall out of it. “I read that Morgan le Fey was an alpha female, but surely there are some deltas that are alive today?”

Filius glanced back towards his colleagues. Severus decided that enough was enough.

“Yes, there are a few,” he said, and his tone was so icy that the energy in the room tangibly faded. “However, that is not something which is pertinent to us, and, God willing, will not *be* an issue for this class. If one of you happens to present as a delta, we shall deal with it then.”

Granger’s jaw dropped and her hand flew up in the air. “No more questions,” Snape snapped, and her arm slowly sunk. He glanced back at Pomona, Minerva, and Filius. “Anything to add?”

“No, I do believe that we’ve covered the basics,” Filius said, to Severus’s great relief. “You are all dismissed, students. Please leave for

your common rooms in an orderly fashion. If you come up with individual questions, feel free to meet with your Heads of House at a later time.”

Or not, Severus thought. It was one of the perks of being a universally feared professor—not even his own students wanted to be alone in an office with him.

Slowly, the first-years trickled out through the single entryway, murmuring to each other as they went. Snape glared until the last of them disappeared into the hall.

“Well,” Pomona said after they were gone, clapping her hands together. “That went swimmingly, don’t you think?” She pointed her wand at the door, and it swung shut.

“As uncomfortable and painful as it usually is,” Snape sneered.

“Don’t be such a sourpuss, Severus. I think we have a very promising batch of first-years! Now, then... shall we begin?”

Pomona’s smile was far too cheery as she conjured up some parchment and a quill. For a Hufflepuff woman, she certainly had a few surprises up her sleeve.

“Ten sickles on Harry Potter presenting as an alpha,” Minerva said proudly of her newly-made *Seeker*, her shoulders squared and looking at Severus haughtily.

Pomona promptly wrote this down. “Seems a bit obvious; low odds on that one...”

“Ten sickles that *Draco Malfoy* will present as an alpha,” Severus said next, meeting Minerva’s glare and putting stock in his own student of choice. Pomona sighed.

“I’ll bet against that,” Minerva responded coolly. “He doesn’t strike me as the type.”

“I’ll bet against Potter, then,” Severus snarled. “As he doesn’t strike me as an alpha, either.”

He only said it to spite her—the truth was that he *did* think Potter would present as an alpha, if for no other reason than he seemed to be a carbon copy of his father. Still, it was worth it to see the smug grin slide from Minerva’s face.

Bitter, horrid old woman.

“Well that makes things more interesting,” Pomona said happily, taking note of these additions as Minerva and Severus glowered at each other.

“Are we done now, children?” Filius interrupted, glancing back and forth between the two of them. “Is amateur hour over...? Good.” He looked at Pomona, who held her quill at the ready. “For omegas, put me down for a galleon each on Fay Dunbar, Daphne Greengrass, and Su Li. For alphas... I’ll put one galleon on both Malfoy and Potter, as well as fifteen sickles apiece on Blaise Zabini, and...” he paused, tapping his chin with his wand thoughtfully.

“Ten sickles on Longbottom,” he concluded.

“*Longbottom!*”

Shockingly, both Severus and Minerva said it at the same time, with the exact same inflection. Pomona laughed merrily as she recorded all Filius’s bets. “You think *Neville Longbottom* will present as an alpha?” Severus sneered, smirking at how Minerva now flushed, embarrassed at her outburst against one of her own students.

“I think Neville Longbottom will surprise us all,” Filius said, nodding.

Filius Flitwick certainly did not mess around when it came to gambling. The small alpha wizard *did* have an uncanny ability to predict who would present as what. Severus was suspicious that being part-goblin may have had something to do with it, but would never be stupid enough to say such a thing out loud.

“Right, then,” Pomona said, holding her quill aloft. “Any other wagers?”

A pause. “Put me down for five sickles on Millicent Bullstrode,” Filius said quietly, looking deeply contemplative.

“...as an alpha female.”

“Oh!” Pomona’s eyes widened with surprise. “Well, I’ll give you excellent odds on *that*... A delta? *Really?*”

“Yes,” Filius agreed. “Since Miss Granger brought it up, I kind of got a feeling. I think we’ll have an *upset* in this year.”

“Wonderful,” Snape drawled. “Just what we need.” He then turned to leave, gesturing lazily as he went, his cloak billowing behind him. “Have a lovely evening, professors.”

Severus strode from the room, feeling confident that he would at least break even in a few years’ time when this group all presented. Last year he’d lost twelve sickles, which was a shame because he’d been consistently in the black for years before that, if only just barely. *Oh well*, he thought as he made his way down to his office, where he still had work to do before the evening came to an end. *At least my house still holds the Quidditch cup.*

The thought did little to make Severus feel better. This group of first-years had only been around for a few weeks, and he already detested the majority of them. Just yesterday, Potter had been made Seeker for the Gryffindor team out of what Severus liked to think was desperation on Minerva’s part, but which he feared was not the case.

Potter was probably decent on a broom... just like his arrogant, idiotic father.

Severus arrived in his office and closed the door, looking up at the silver trophy and seeing his own distorted, unhappy reflection there. He grimaced.

It was an upsetting year already.

Fake Out, Break Out

I've just been attacked by dementors and I might be expelled from Hogwarts. I want to know what's going on and when I'm going to get out of here. Also, I preemptively drank the suppressant I was sent home with a few days ago, and am now out... so sooner might be better than later.

Harry copied these words onto three different pieces of parchment, addressing the first to Sirius, the second to Ron, and the third to Hermione. Hedwig was off hunting, so Harry was resigned to waiting until she returned. He paced his bedroom in the meantime, casting furious glances at her empty cage like it was responsible for her absence.

His head throbbed, his body ached, he was feeling *extremely* irritable... and while these were all the symptoms he had been told countless time to watch out for this summer, Harry knew he wasn't going through the change—not yet, at least. There was no awkward physical manifestation 'making itself known'.

...Not that he felt the need to put that pertinent detail in his letters which were practically threats. The unwritten message he was sending to so-called friends was obvious:

I am angry and symptomatic, and if you think things are bad now, imagine how bad they would be if I did exactly what you all feared might happen if left to my own devices—presenting as an alpha male while here, alone with my horrible muggle family, and not taking the suppressant at the right time, for whatever reason.

Harry smirked, feeling justified in his decision to sound like he thought he might be about to go through the change.

He was, admittedly, a bit spiteful.

Every wizarding household with a child who was at the age nearing magical maturity was supplied with a repressing elixir during the summer months, whether female or male. It was mandated by the Ministry, just in case young witches or wizards presented during this time, which was a fairly common event. Typically, the elixirs were sent straight to the parents.

Harry, as usual, was a special case.

Whereas most muggle families with muggle-born children had a Hogwarts representative come to their home and explain magical dynamics to them, Harry had Alastor Mad-eye Moody and a team of Aurors waiting at King's Cross Station. They knew enough about how Harry's aunt and uncle were, and Petunia, to Harry's shock, had already known about magical dynamics when Remus tentatively broached the subject.

Later, he realized why. Of course she would know about magical signatures and the drama which ensued during presentation—Harry's mother, her sister, had been an omega.

Still, no risks could be taken, and so Harry had been given a healthy amount of the male suppressant for the summer, and while it had been given directly to him, a brief explanation was still forced upon his guardians. Moody had made it perfectly clear to the Dursleys that it would be in everyone's very best interest that Harry have access to this, as well as all his other school things this summer... or it would not bode well for anyone at all.

“Ever heard of what an alpha male is like, going through the change, uncontained?” he'd growled, staring down Vernon like he was little more than a cockroach.

Vernon—to his credit—hadn't withered under Moody's initial glare... but then again, that was probably more due to his uncle's stupidity than his bravery. “I'm sure it's nothing I can't control in my own house.”

Because Vernon, of course, was appalled at the idea of there being magical potions in his home.

Harry was sure that Moody had been about to verbally rip his uncle to shreds, but he hadn't needed to. Petunia had spoken first.

“We will make sure he has access to it,” she'd said at once—shocking everyone, Harry most of all.

And that had been that. Harry got to keep his trunk, the bottle of elixir, and all his school things in his room—including Hedwig and her currently empty cage. Harry glared at it and the open window again, willing her to return. The star-strewn sky stared back at him, void of owls and hope.

He hadn't actually drunk the repressing elixir yet.

The bottle was sitting on his bedside table, full of a deep blue liquid. He was told—countless times—that there was no harm in taking it if it turned out he was not going through the change after all, other than a mild stomachache. He was also told that he shouldn't take all of it at once, that half the contents would be plenty to stop a rut if taken after the *bulbus glandis* had begun to form. And, of course, he was to owl his Godfather immediately if this were the case.

Well, Harry thought scathingly, he was not going through the change, but he'd be damned if he stayed in the house any longer. Harry picked up the bottle and, feeling a vicious smugness as he did it, drank it all.

He grimaced afterwards. It tasted like licorice and something else, something bitter. Scowling, Harry chucked the bottle out the open window, where it made a satisfying crashing sound when it hit the street.

It was a true sign of how committed his aunt and uncle were to ignoring him that he was not yelled at for this.

No matter how Harry had shouted, demanding answers—who was that Howler from? Are you in touch with wizards and witches? Remember my last what?—Petunia said nothing. They locked him in his room, and from that moment on, it was as if Harry ceased to exist.

Treatment he was, unfortunately, rather accustomed to.

Harry continued to pace, his head throbbing from where Dudley had struck him and from where he had hit the window. His muscles did ache, really, as he'd practically carried his whale of a cousin home... after being attacked by a dementor.

A dementor, in Little Whinging! Miss Figg was a squib, Mundungus had been tailing him in secret, Harry was officially suspended from Hogwarts and had a hearing scheduled at the Ministry of Magic—and still no one would tell him what was going on.

Harry kicked his trunk in frustration, but far from making him feel any better, it made matters worse—he now had a stinging pain in his foot to accompany the rest of the aches in his body.

Just as he was about to sit on the edge of his bed and cease his tireless pacing, Hedwig flew through the open window with a soft rustling of feathers.

“About bloody time!” Harry snapped when she landed lightly on top

of her cage. “You can drop that, I’ve got work for you!”

Hedwig’s large, amber eyes gazed at him reproachfully, a dead frog dangling from her beak.

“Come here,” Harry demanded, and when she failed to immediately fly to him, approached her instead. He began tying the three rolls of parchment to her leg as he said, “Take these straight to Sirius, Ron, and Hermione, and don’t you come back until they’ve written good, long responses. Keep pecking them until they’ve written a decent-length if you must. Understood?”

Hedwig made a muffled hooting noise, her beak still full of half-eaten frog.

“Go on, then” Harry said.

She took off at once. The moment she’d disappeared into the night, Harry threw himself down on his bed, not bothering to undress. He crossed his arms and stared at the ceiling. Now, in addition to every other miserable feeling he had, Harry felt a pang of guilt. Hedwig was his only friend here at Privet Drive, and he had just been irritable with her, rudely sending her away. But he would make it up to her, he swore, especially once she returned with three gratifyingly long letters.

They could not possibly ignore a dementor attack, a hearing at the Ministry, and the fact that the notoriously reckless and now incensed Harry Potter, at the dangerous age of fourteen, no longer had any repressing elixir at his disposable.

Terrible things could happen... and Harry was known for having terrible things happen to him at the most terrible of times.

With this disturbingly comforting notion, sleep rolled over him, and Harry thought no more.

Hedwig didn’t return the next morning.

Harry spent all day in his bedroom, leaving it only to go to the bathroom. Petunia periodically shoved food through the cat flap that his uncle had installed years ago, and every time Harry would shout questions at her about the Howler—but not once did she respond.

Other than this, the Durlseys kept far away from his room. Harry had

never been more petulant, switching from long phases of being extremely twitchy and unable to stay still to being uncharacteristically lethargic, staring at the wall or open window and feeling numb.

Currently, Harry was pacing his room again, his mind racing with anxiety. Petunia had just collected his plate from dinner, none of which he'd been able to eat. What if they ruled against him at this hearing? What if he was found guilty for breaching the International Statute of Secrecy, even though he had done it in self-defense? If he were really expelled from Hogwarts, would he be allowed to live with Sirius, at least, as his godfather had suggested over a year ago? He could not return to living at the Dursleys full-time, now that he knew of the world to which he truly belonged...

Well, no, that couldn't happen, Harry reminded himself. Muggle-borns had to be brought into the magical world, especially if they presented as alpha or omega—a law which many of the egotistic purebloods scoffed at, but which was necessary for many reasons. And seeing as how everyone was so keen to believe that Harry would be an alpha...

Harry's already uneasy stomach—perhaps he should not have taken that elixir, after all—churned at the thought. All last year, the speculation had grown unbearable. Selected as a Triwizard Champion alongside two other alpha males, everyone expected Harry Potter to present at any given moment, transitioning into the alpha male he was born to be and causing a fair amount of drama in the process. Rita Skeeter had anticipated it happening between the Tasks, asking him questions about how he felt about his inevitable transition in a broom closet before Dumbledore had rescued him.

Unfortunately, everyone else in the wizarding world appeared to agree with her. Harry had never felt more pressure to become something over which he had no control... which was really saying something, seeing as Harry was the Boy Who Lived, the youngest Seeker in a century, and, at that point, the Fourth Champion.

But then the Third Task had happened, Cedric had been murdered, and all Harry could think about now was the fact that Lord Voldemort, most powerful and darkest alpha male of all time, had returned... a fact which was being blatantly ignored by the wizarding world at large.

Harry covered his face with his hands, resisting the urge to start pacing again. Eventually, after several minutes of trying to think of nothing at all, Harry slid into one of his more apathetic phases. His

eyes went out of focus as he stared at the ceiling. The sun began to set, and Harry fully hoped he might just fall asleep early and dream of nothing.

He had just closed his eyes when it sounded like the entire first floor exploded beneath him.

The whole house shook, and Harry heard a series of bangs, crashes, and thuds. His aunt let out a high and quickly-ended scream. From the crack beneath his door, Harry saw flashes of red—the light of what was undeniably magic.

Harry sat bolt upright, mind abruptly lurching back to life. He jumped up and grabbed his wand, keeping it raised as he stood next to his door, straining to hear. No further sounds came after the sudden onslaught of commotion. Harry was just staring at the doorknob, his pulse racing in anticipation—were Ministry officials here? Or worse, Death Eaters? He could no longer rule such a thing out, after encountering a dementor—when the lock clicked opened of its own accord and the door swung open. Harry's heart leapt in his throat as a tall, dark figure walked right into his bedroom, and—

“Lumos.”

The wandlight illuminated a familiar, extremely welcome face.

“Professor Lupin!”

Harry's anxiety vanished in a moment. Remus Lupin was standing in his bedroom, looking disheveled and tired, but smiling broadly. Harry was too shocked to do anything other than stand there, disbelieving that someone had really, truly come for him.

“Hello, Harry,” he said cheerfully. But then his smile faltered, and he fixed Harry with a critical look. Lupin's eyes swept up and down Harry's body, and he even sniffed the air intently, looking slightly puzzled.

Harry realized what he was doing just before he spoke. “I see your letters were somewhat... fictitious,” he said at length.

Harry lowered his wand and blushed. Lupin, an adult wizard who had presented as a beta long ago, could easily sense that Harry was still nowhere near-magical maturity. “...Might've been,” he admitted, smiling ruefully.

Remus sighed. "Well, congratulations. It worked. Your insinuation had Sirius babbling to Dumbledore at once, and he sent for us to come to get you, straight away."

"Us? Who else is here?"

"Come down into the kitchen and I'll introduce you."

Feeling like he must be in a dream, Harry followed Lupin down the stairs, keeping his wand up instinctively. Entering his aunt's kitchen to see it full of wizards was easily the most surreal sight he had ever come across. There were eight or nine in total, and they each had their own wands raised, light emitting from the tip of each one. They all stared at Harry with faces full of anticipation, some of which Harry recognized, and some which he did not.

"Oooh, he looks exactly like I thought he would!" one woman shouted. She looked to be the youngest one there, with a heart-shaped face and short hair that was a violent shade of purple. "Wother, Harry!" she said when they made eye contact.

"Yes, I see what you mean, Remus," said a tall, black man with a deep voice and bald head. "He looks just like James."

"Except the eyes," came the usual addition to this observation. It was spoken in a wheezy voice from one of the shortest wizards there.

"Harry, allow me to introduce you. Meet Nymphodora—"

"Don't call me that, Remus," the purple-haired witch instantly interrupted. "It's Tonks."

"Nymphadora Tonks, who prefers to be known by her surname only," Lupin finished, smiling. "And this is Kingsley Shacklebolt, Elphias Doge, Dedalus Diggle, Emmeline Vance, Sturgis Podmore, Hestia Jones..."

Remus pointed towards each of the wizards and witches as he introduced them, all of whom inclined their heads respectfully as they were introduced.

"And this is Alastor Moody," he finished, gesturing towards the wizard with the wooden leg and mis-matched eyes.

"Yes, I know," Harry murmured. It felt very odd to be introduced to a man he'd thought he'd known well but had turned out to be a Death

Eater in disguise. "Hello, Professor."

"I don't know about Professor," Moody growled in greeting. "Didn't get around to too much teaching, did I? Lower your wand, boy, don't you think you're in enough trouble these days?"

His voice was stern, but Moody was smirking. Harry laughed breathily and put his wand in his jeans pocket.

"Not there! You should never keep your wand in your back pocket like that! Better wizards than you have lost their buttocks, you know!"

"Who d'you know who's ever lost a buttock?"

"Never you mind," Moody growled. He then gave Harry the same, sweeping look that Remus had, only it was far more judgmental. "And you, it would seem, are a liar, Potter."

Harry could feel himself turning a brilliant shade of red, he blushed so fiercely. Everyone continued to stare at him, perceiving quite clearly that he was still magically immature. Possibly other kinds of immature, as well.

Moody scoffed but didn't say anything else on the matter. "You quite sure it's him, Lupin? Wouldn't it be just fine, if we brought back some Death Eater hopped up on suppressants and Polyjuice Potion pretending to be him? Ask him something only the real Potter would know. Unless someone brought some Veritaserum?"

"Harry, what form is your patronus?" Lupin asked calmly.

"A-a stag."

"That's him, Mad-eye."

Harry could hardly believe this was happening. He glanced around at each of the wizards and witches in turn, all of whom stared back at him with wide, curious eyes. The rest of them, at least, did not seem too bothered by the fact that his letters to Sirius and the others had been purposefully misinforming.

Just when Harry was about to ask what so many people were doing here, Remus spoke. "A surprising number of people volunteered to come get you once we heard about the dementor attack... among other things," he said, smirking.

“Well, the more the better,” Moody said. “We’re your guard, Potter.”

“I’m... Not that I mind their absence, but where are the Dursleys?” Harry asked nervously.

“In the living room,” Remus answered. Harry followed his pointed finger through the doorway, and his jaw dropped when he saw his aunt, uncle, and cousin all passed out on the floor. “We had to stun them when we arrived. Quickest and easiest thing to do... though we probably could have put some cushioning charms on the ground, first.” Remus added the last bit guiltily, like he was slightly ashamed that he hadn’t thought to do so.

“They backtalked me at the station,” Moody snarled with contempt. “They deserve the headache.”

“Wicked,” Harry breathed before he could stop himself. Tonks caught his eyes and smirked.

“The original plan was to send them a letter by muggle post, something to lure them away so we could sneak in,” she explained. “But then Sirius got your owl, and Dumbledore told us there was no time to waste.”

“Really?” Harry wasn’t sure if he could feel impressed with himself or guilty that he had managed to force Dumbledore’s hand.

“Really. In fact, I’m surprised that he didn’t just come and get you himself...” Remus murmured.

“I suppose Dumbledore has better things to be doing, hasn’t he?” said Moody, who looked like he was resisting the urge to jab Vernon with his wooden leg.

Harry tried not to laugh. “So, we are leaving, right?”

“Yes, we’re just waiting for the all-clear,” Remus said. “Should be shortly.”

“Very clean, these muggles,” Tonks noted, looking about the living room and kitchen with interest. “My father was a muggle-born, but he’s a slob. Guess it varies then, eh? Just like with wizards?” She ran a finger along the counter like she was checking for dust, then looked surprised when there was none.

“Er. Yes, I suppose,” Harry said. Then he looked to Remus, unable not

to ask. "What's been going on? No one's told me anything! What's happening, what is Vol—"

The reaction was instantaneous; everyone hissed and shuddered at before he could finish the word, and Moody growled, "Shut up!"

"What?" Harry balked.

"Not here, it's too risky. We can discuss things back at Headquarters."

"Headquarters?" Harry asked. "We're not going to the Burrow, then?"

"No," Remus said. "That would be too dangerous as well. We've set up headquarters somewhere else, somewhere undetectable... you'll see. Anyway, we're going to be leaving soon, by broom. Go upstairs and get your things together, Harry."

Harry nodded and turned to leave. "I'll help you!" Tonks said brightly, following behind him.

"This place is a bit too clean, you know?" she commented as they walked. "Feels unnatural—oh, this is better."

Harry's bedroom was certainly a far cry from the rest of the house. Having not known that he would be leaving so suddenly and so soon, Harry hadn't bothered keeping his room clean or having anything packed and ready. Hedwig's cage was dirty, his bed was unmade, there were clothes and books strewn all over the floor. It was, in a word, a mess. Harry quickly began to gather things at random, throwing them haphazardly into his trunk.

"You know, I don't think purple is my color," Tonks said pensively. She was examining her reflection in the mirror. "Kind of washes me out, don't you think?"

"Er," Harry said unhelpfully, peering up at her over a copy of Quidditch Teams of Britain and Ireland.

"Yes, it does," she said decisively. She then screwed up her face and closed her eyes like she was straining to remember something, and a second later, her violet hair turned bubble-gum pink.

"How'd you do that?" Harry said, staring at her and gaping. She opened her eyes again and grinned.

"I'm a Metamorphmagus," she answered, turning her head from side

to side so that she could admire her handiwork. "I was born one. When I was training to become an Auror, I got top marks in the Concealment and Disguise portion, it was great."

"You're an Auror?" Harry asked, becoming more impressed with her by the second.

"Yes," she said. "So is Kingsley, though he's higher up than I am. I only just qualified a year ago. And wouldn't you know it, they still almost didn't let me come tonight!"

Harry dropped the book he was holding at her sudden bitterness. "Er, really? Why?"

"Because I'm an omega."

"You are?"

Harry instantly regretted the tone of surprise evident in his voice, but he couldn't help it. Four years in the wizarding world had been plenty to reveal to him the stereotypes and biases concerning omegas.

Omegas were rarely expected to be able to cast harmful curses and jinxes well. Harry remembered how shocked everyone had been when Fleur, an omega female, had been announced as the Beauxbatons champion. Yet the witch had done quite well for herself, approaching each of the tasks with the kind of magic that she was best suited for—hypnotic charms instead of brutal curses, things like that. Fleur had been just as dangerous of an opponent as the wizards.

"Yes, I am," Tonks said proudly. "First omega female to become an Auror in over two decades. Fully qualified, religiously taking the repressing elixir, and the others still didn't want me to come because they thought my magic might muck everything up."

"...Oh," Harry said, comprehension finally dawning on him. "They didn't want you to come, because... because I basically told them I was in the process of presenting. As an alpha."

"Yeah. But even if you had been, so what? You said you downed all your potion, right? And I take mine on schedule, so there was no real issue... except for the one that's always there."

She frowned, turning away from the mirror and facing Harry fully. "What do you mean?" Harry asked cautiously.

“Being an omega is a constant uphill battle,” she muttered. “With the exception of Remus, all the men down there are alphas. Arrogant, big-headed alphas.”

“Are they?” Harry supposed that wasn’t surprising, but being unable to sense magical signatures, hadn’t been sure.

“Yep. And oh, I mean that in the most affectionate way,” she said. “Especially Mad-eye. He’s sort of taken me under his wing... It’s just in their nature, to feel overly protective of me, I guess. But just because I’m not the best at direct curses doesn’t mean I can’t take care of myself. In fact, I’m quite an asset to the Auror team.”

“I’m sure,” Harry agreed at once.

“Not only can I change my appearance at will, but my healing spells are impeccable, and my wards are top-notch,” Tonks elaborated, standing taller still. “Ah, but what am I doing, going on about all that? We’re leaving soon! Let’s...pack!”

Tonks brandished her wand in a long, sweeping motion, and Harry’s books, clothes, telescope, and scales all flew into his trunk in a jumble.

“It’s probably not very neat,” she admitted, “I’ve never been the greatest at house-holdy spells—that’s a stereotype for omegas that I definitely don’t fit into, as well as the whole ‘elegant and graceful’ bit—I’m dead clumsy—but anyway, it’s all in there! Except for the big things, of course. Got everything else? Cauldron? Broom? Wow! A Firebolt?”

Her eyes widened when they landed on Harry’s most treasured possession, the broomstick his godfather had purchased him. He beamed with pride.

“And I’m still riding a Comet Two Sixty,” Tonks said with obvious envy. “Ah, well... Got your wand in your pocket? Both your buttocks still firmly attached? Excellent. Locomotor trunk.”

Harry’s trunk lifted several inches off the ground and hovered ahead of them through the open doorway. With her free hand, Tonks grabbed Hedwig’s dirty cage and followed it. She smiled at Harry over her shoulder. With her pink hair and honest, bubbly personality, he couldn’t help but grin, too.

“We’re busting you out of here, Harry!” she cheered.

In that moment, Harry forgot all about mysterious dementors, stressful Ministry hearings... and the fact that he had lied to everyone about presenting, after all.

The House of Black

The headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix may be found at number 12, Grimmauld Place.

Harry had not yet fully recovered from their long and frigid flight across the country, but he watched in rapt fascination at the magic that unfolded before him. The battered door, grimy walls, and dirty windows of a new building had just appeared; bricks and mortar that inflated impossibly between numbers 10 and 14, shoving the other structures aside. Harry gaped as it happened. The muggles within the first buildings seemed not to notice anything at all.

Moody prodded Harry in the back, muttering, “Go on, then.”

Harry hurried up the weathered steps, staring at a door of worn wood with black paint chipping off its surface. The doorknob was that of a serpent, wrought in tarnished silver.

Lupin stepped in front of him and tapped the door once with his wand. Harry heard many metallic clicks, something like a chain clinking, and then the door swung open.

“Go on in,” Lupin whispered. “But don’t touch anything, and don’t go far.”

Harry slowly passed the threshold. The home was completely dark within, and there was a smell of something sweet and musky, like decay. The others filed in behind him, carrying his trunk and Hedwig’s cage. Moody remained on the doorstep to release the street lights he had stolen moments before with the Put-Outer. After the London alley was bathed once more in luminescent light, he closed the door, and the darkness in the hall swallowed them whole.

“Here, stand still—”

Moody tapped Harry on the head with his wand, and Harry felt a trickling sensation flowing down his spine, pleasantly warm. Once it vanished, he knew the disillusionment charm that Moody had placed on him to be lifted.

“No one move while I give us a bit of light,” Moody murmured.

There was a soft hissing noise, and suddenly a few gas lamps and a

chandelier covered in cobwebs sputtered to life, bathing the hall in a dull glow. The wallpaper was peeling, the carpet was aged and threadbare. Old, blackened portraits hung along the walls, crooked and deteriorating. Harry thought he heard something scuttling along the floor. The chandelier and a candelabra that had lit up on a nearby table were both shaped like serpents.

The atmosphere of this place was sinister, neglected, and profoundly ominous.

There were hurried footsteps from down the hall, and soon Mrs. Weasley stood before them. She was beaming in welcome, though she looked paler and thinner than Harry had ever seen her.

“Oh, Harry! It’s lov—”

She stopped short. Mrs. Weasley’s smile faltered as she looked at him, examining him critically with her brows furrowed, confused. Harry felt his face growing warm. She looked up to Lupin as though waiting for an explanation.

“Someone was a bit fictitious,” Lupin murmured. “Harry hasn’t presented, after all. As you can tell.”

Mrs. Weasley returned her focus to Harry, her lips pursed as her expression became torn. Harry could imagine why—on one hand, she wanted to scold him for lying; on the other, she was just happy to have him here, safe and sound.

She settled on dismissing her annoyance. “You look a bit peaky, dear,” she said, swiftly regaining her motherly demeanor. “But you’ll have to wait a bit for dinner, I’m afraid...”

She looked over his shoulder to the witches and wizards behind him. “He arrived a while ago, the meeting has already started...”

They all made noises of interest before shuffling past Harry down the hall. Harry made to follow them, but Mrs. Weasley grabbed his shoulder, stopping him. “Sorry, dear, the meeting is only for Order members. You can wait upstairs with Ron and Hermione, and we’ll have dinner afterwards. I’ll show you to your room, just make sure to be quiet in the hall.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want you to wake anything up.”

“What could I—”

“I’ll explain later, no time at the moment—come along, follow me.”

She pressed her fingers to her lips and led Harry up the staircase. The wood creaked beneath them, and they passed a row of shrunken heads that were mounted on the wall. Upon closer inspection, Harry could see that they were the severed heads of dead house-elves, all with snout-like noses.

Every step had Harry feeling more and more bewildered. What on earth were they doing here, in this house that looked like it had once been inhabited by the darkest of wizards?

He was about to ask when Mrs. Weasley paused, stopping him on the second landing and pointing towards a door. “This is you, dear. I’ll come get you when the meeting is over.”

She hurried down the stairs again before Harry could say anything. He glanced at the door to his room—the handle of which was another serpent wrought in aged silver—and opened the door.

He only just caught the sight of a high ceiling and twin beds before his vision was obscured completely by some very bushy, very *familiar*, brunette hair. Hermione had thrown her arms around him the moment he stepped into the room, trapping him in a suffocating hug. Pigwidgeon zoomed around their heads in circles, twittering happily.

“Harry! Oh, Ron, he’s here! Harry is here!”

Harry spotted Ron sitting on the edge of one of the beds. He got to his feet, grinning. “Let him breathe, Hermione,” he said. “You’re going to crush him.”

Hermione was smiling radiantly when she pulled away, keeping her hands on his shoulders. But then, about two seconds later, and her smile was faltering much in the same way Mrs. Weasley’s had.

Harry’s blush returned with a vengeance. She lowered her arms. “Harry,” she started slowly, eyes flickering up and down his body in a judgmental fashion. She didn’t bother voicing the question, just raised one eyebrow at him expectantly.

Harry was saved from needing to respond right away when something soft and white soared across the room, landing gently on his shoulder.

“Hedwig!”

Harry’s owl nipped at his ear affectionately. Harry stroked her feathers and grinned. “She’s been in a right state,” Ron muttered. “Tried to bite my finger off last time we wrote you, look—”

Ron showed him a half-healed but still clearly deep cut. Harry felt a twinge of guilt. “Oh, yeah. Sorry about that. I just wanted answers, you know...”

“We wanted to give them to you, mate, we did, really. Hermione was going crazy, kept saying that you would do something reckless if you didn’t have any news—”

“Which it appears that you have done something reckless,” Hermione interrupted coolly. “Harry, you haven’t presented! Did you—did you make that up to get them to come sooner? Did you actually drink that suppressing elixir, too?”

Harry looked down, his face burning hotter. He had known that Hermione would be able to tell that he was a liar—she had presented as a beta in their fourth year, just before the Yule Ball. Harry and Ron had needed to endure her going on and on about how *insightful* it was, to be able to perceive magical energies, how *fascinating*. And though she’d admitted that the alpha and omega auras *were* the most striking, Hermione had said she found the beta magical signatures warmer, more comfortable. She was relieved to be a beta herself, too. The thought of presenting as an omega had made her extremely nervous.

“I might’ve,” Harry mumbled, confessing the true extent of his recklessness. “But it doesn’t matter, it doesn’t cause any harm if you drink it and you’re *not* presenting...”

Hermione huffed and crossed her arms. “You shouldn’t have wasted an elixir like that! The *Masculum Reprimunt* is expensive! Not nearly as expensive as the *Femina Reprimunt*, but still...”

“I don’t blame you, mate,” Ron said. “I would’ve done the same thing if I’d just been attacked by a bloody dementor and told I had to go to a hearing for saving my own damn life.”

Harry’s blood ran cold. He had forced the Ministry hearing very firmly from of his mind, and now that Ron brought it up again, anxiety pooled in his stomach.

“Oh, they can’t expel you, they just can’t,” Hermione rushed to say.

"I've looked it up, there's a provision in the Decree for the Restriction of Underage Sorcery for the use of magic in life-threatening situations. You haven't broken any laws at all."

Harry did not feel relieved. "I hope so," he murmured. Hedwig hooted in his ear, annoyed that he had ceased in his affectionate stroking.

"We saw Dumbledore right after it happened," Ron said in a low voice. "You should have seen it. He was furious, when he found out Mundungus had abandoned his post early. It was scary."

Harry felt a sickening jolt in his stomach at those words.

Everyone had known that he was being secretly tailed by Order members except for him, then.

"I'm glad he left," Harry muttered spitefully. "If he hadn't, I wouldn't have used magic, and Dumbledore would have just left me with the Dursley's all summer long."

"That's not true," Ron said. "My mum said there were plans in place to move you here in a few weeks."

"*A few weeks!*" Hedwig flew from his shoulder at the sudden exclamation, perching on top of the wardrobe. "Thank god for Mundungus being a lazy idiot, then!"

Hermione and Ron both winced at his shouting. Harry scowled, his sour mood deepening with every second.

"We wanted to tell you everything that's been going on, we really did," Ron said cautiously. "But Dumbledore made us swear not to, he didn't want you to know *anything*, not while you were at Privet Drive. Said that owls might get intercepted, that it was too dangerous..."

"He could've found other ways to keep me informed, if he'd wanted," Harry snarled. "You know he has other ways of sending messages besides owls."

Ron and Hermione shared a concerned look. "Well, we thought that too, but—"

"But he didn't want you to know *anything* yet," Ron finished.

"Maybe he doesn't think I'm trustworthy," Harry murmured, a venomous emotion coiling in his chest.

“Don’t be thick,” Ron said, looking concerned.

“Maybe he thinks I can’t take care of myself—or maybe he just doesn’t care *at all*. He didn’t even bother showing up after he knew I’d taken the elixir and made it sound like I was about to present.”

“Oh, no, he *must* not care. He only sent half a dozen of the strongest, most capable witches and wizards of the Order of the Phoenix,” Hermione said, and though she had looked wary of Harry’s obvious anger a moment before, she stood a bit straighter, now.

“Dumbledore’s been insanely busy, Harry; we’ve only seen him twice since the school year ended and he didn’t have any time for us, either!”

“And we don’t know much more than you, honestly,” Ron added. “Mum won’t let us near the meetings, says we’re too young—”

“SO YOU HAVEN’T BEEN IN THE MEETINGS, BIG DEAL!” Harry was shouting at the top of his lungs before he knew what was happening. Pigwidgeon began zooming around in earnest, a blur of feathers circling Harry’s head. “YOU’VE STILL BEEN TOGETHER! I’VE BEEN STUCK AT PRIVET DRIVE FOR ALMOST A MONTH, NICKING PAPERS OUT OF BINS, TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHAT THE HELL HAS BEEN GOING ON!”

Ron flinched and took several hasty steps away; Hermione’s stature withered again in an instant.

“We wanted to tell you, we did—”

“COULDN’T HAVE WANTED TO THAT BADLY, OR YOU WOULD’VE WRITTEN A DECENT BLOODY LETTER!”

“We c-couldn’t, Dumbledore made us swear not—”

“I IMAGINE YOU’VE BEEN HAVING A GREAT LAUGH, HOLED UP HERE TOGETHER, WHILE I—”

“Harry, we are really sorry!” Hermione’s eyes were shining with moisture. “And you’re right, you’re absolutely right—I would be furious too, if it were me!”

Harry glared, chest heaving, but didn’t shout again. He started pacing. “What even is this place?”

“Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix,” Ron answered

immediately.

“And what, exactly, is the bloody Order—”

“It’s a secret society,” Hermione rushed to say. “It was founded by Dumbledore, it’s the same society that gathered to fight You-Know-Who last time.”

“Who’s in it?”

“Quite a few people, we’ve met about twenty of them but suspect that there are more...”

Harry came to a halt, his hands in his pocket. “So? What about Voldemort, then?” he snapped, and they both flinched. “What’s he doing, what’s he been up to—”

“We don’t know, we’ve told you, we haven’t been in the meetings,” Hermione said.

“But we have a sort of general idea,” Ron added swiftly when Harry looked mutinous. “We’ve been doing a bit of eavesdropping—Fred and George, they’ve invented these things called Extendable Ears—we’ve been using them to listen in on the meetings occasionally...”

“Extendable—?”

“Ears, yeah. They’re exactly what they sound like—ears on long string-like things that allow you to hear wherever they are. From what we’ve gathered so far, we know that the Order is working on recruiting more members, keeping tabs on known Death Eaters, and guard duty, they’re always talking about guard duty and how important it is to have *alphas* on that job... whatever it is they’re protecting all the time...”

Harry scoffed. “Don’t reckon they were talking about me, hm?”

“Oh, yeah...” Ron’s face was one of dawning comprehension.

Harry scowled and turned away, and a strained silence settled over them as he looked back and forth between the two. There was something about the way that Ron kept fidgeting and that Hermione kept glancing at him that annoyed Harry to no end, so much so that he felt like shouting again.

“*What is it?*” he seethed, making them both jump. “There’s obviously

something else, something huge you're not telling me, so why don't you just spit it out—if you're *allowed* to, of course—”

“It's Ron,” Hermione interrupted quickly. “He's presented. A beta.”

Ron turned a bright pink, a flush that reached his ears. He only glanced up at Harry for a moment before his eyes fell to the floor, scratching his head in embarrassment.

“I...oh,” Harry said. “Really?”

Ron nodded. Harry felt his anger lessen, replaced with some emotion that was even less welcoming.

So *Ron* had been able to sense that he was lying too, then...

Harry forced a smile. “And you just—you just weren't going to tell me?”

“Didn't really fit in with the flow of conversation,” Ron muttered, his blush deepening.

“It just happened last week.” Hermione wiped the unfallen tears from her eyes and grinned at him. “I had just gotten here, and it was so funny, because we were just about to go down for breakfast when he froze on the platform. He just couldn't stop staring at me.”

“Well, you were just so—all *different* like!” Ron spluttered, and he could not have possibly been more red. “I'd never perceived anyone's magic before!”

Hermione smirked knowingly but made no further comment. “It's wild, Harry,” Ron went on, unable to stop himself. “Seeing magic, *feeling* it—it's *really* crazy!”

Harry was finding it very difficult to be excited for his friend at the moment, but he did his best. “Congratulations,” he said.

“Thanks... I was a bit bummed at first, but then I remember what Bill said about his presentation and how that was, and... Well. I'm all right with being a beta.”

Harry nodded understandingly. Bill was the only one of the Weasley children to have presented as an alpha. It was a fact which Ron used to point out regularly whenever they talked about magical dynamics, hopeful in his younger years of becoming an alpha as well.

He didn't seem very upset about it now, though. Harry tried to make his smile appear more genuine. "I suppose your mum had kittens when she saw," he said.

Ron laughed. "You have *no* idea. Because, well... Ginny sort of presented, too. Earlier this summer."

"Really?"

"Yeah." Ron's expression darkened a fraction. When he didn't elaborate, Hermione cast him a distasteful look and explained.

"She's an omega."

"...Oh."

Ron glowered at the floor. Harry had a sneaking suspicion that the rest of the Weasley boys were just as unsettled. If they had been overprotective of their little sister before...

"I wasn't here yet when she presented, but I guess Mrs. Weasley figured out what was going on before anything dramatic could happen."

Ron snorted. "Yeah, well. Ginny was having an outright panic attack over the fact that she thought that she'd folded the laundry wrong. She even started crying—and Ginny *never* cries, mind you. It didn't take much to put it together."

"But you had some suppressant here, right?"

"Yeah, and they're going to supply her with some until she's done with Hogwarts. Ministry mandated and all that, just like all the *Masculum Reprimunt* we've been getting every summer for the past decade or something, 'just in case'. Still some here, in fact, since I didn't need it... So, if you decide to join to the party, so to speak..."

He laughed weakly, and Harry was hit with very sudden and unwelcome realization.

He was the last one. He, Harry, was the only one in this house who was still... immature.

"You're a bit younger than us," Hermione said as though he had just said this out loud. "So it would make sense that you would present later."

He supposed that was true, but it did little to make Harry feel better. He looked at Ron and Hermione, knowing that they could perceive magic in a way that he could not, and felt something of a rift between them.

The uncomfortable stillness was broken by two loud, sharp cracks.

Fred and George had materialized before them, nearly landing right on top of Harry as they did. Hermione squealed and Pigwidgeon screeched and fled, joining Hedwig on top of the wardrobe.

“Would you stop doing that?” Hermione said in a frail voice, her hand on her chest.

“Hello, Harry!” Fred said, ignoring her. “Thought we heard your lovely voice... Oh, my.”

His friendly smile shifted into one of slight confusion for only a second, and then he and George were both staring at him with identical, deeply amused grins. Harry’s face was red again before they even called him out, having figured out his ruse so quickly.

“Someone cried wolf,” said George.

“Ickle Harry is an ickle liar,” Fred drawled, poking him in the shoulder. Harry had the urge to grab his finger and break it off, but was too embarrassed to do anything.

“Stop it,” Hermione snapped. “Besides, I thought you would be happy that he hadn’t presented.”

“Too true,” Fred agreed, draping one arm around Harry’s shoulder. “I much prefer Harry as a puer.”

Harry grimaced at the word. Puer. It was the unofficial term for someone who was still magically immature, and was often used by older witches and wizards as either a term of endearment... or, more frequently, as an insult.

It also meant child.

“You passed your apparition tests, then?” Harry said, desperate to change the topic.

“With flying colors,” said George.

Just then, there was a tentative knock on the door. “Can... Can I come

in?"

Ginny pushed the door open just enough to peer through it, revealing a mane of fiery red hair and a single wide, brown eye. She appeared to be so nervous that she reminded Harry of the first time he'd met her, when she was just eleven years old.

"No reason to be shy, Gin. Just a bunch of betas and a sneaky little puer."

Harry glared at Fred, who grinned merrily and opened the door. Ginny's brows shot up in surprise, and Harry couldn't tell if she was disappointed or relieved.

Oh, right, he realized quickly. Because Ginny was an omega now, and they had all expected Harry to arrive as currently presenting alpha... That was probably why Fred and George had showed up first too, apparating right into his room before their sister got a chance...

He looked away, wondering if his face would ever stop burning.

"Anyway, Harry, do you mind withholding your shouts of boisterous rage? We were about to try listening in on the meeting."

George held up an object which looked very much like a human ear, with a long, flesh colored string attached to it. "Be careful," Ron muttered. "If Mum catches you again..."

"It's worth the risk. That's a major meeting they're having tonight."

"It won't work," Ginny said. "They've cast an Imperturbable Charm. I tried throwing some stuff at it, and everything just sort of floated away. There's no way one of those will make it under the door."

"Shame," Fred said, sighing. "I really wanted to hear what Snape had to say..."

"Snape?" Harry asked. "Snape is here?"

"Yeah. Giving a top-secret report tonight... the git."

"He's on our side, now" Hermione chided, narrowing her eyes at the twins.

"Still a git."

"Bill thinks so, too," Ginny said decisively.

“Bill’s here?” Harry was still a mixture of flustered and angry, but his curiosity was overcoming his urge to start yelling again. “I thought Bill was in Egypt.”

“He was,” Fred said slyly, “but he applied for a desk job at Gringotts so he could work for the Order. Says he misses Egypt, but there are other perks...”

“Remember the lovely omega, Fleur Delacour?” George continued. “Well, she’s had her beautiful eyes on some prime Weasley alpha, if you know what I mean.”

They both sniggered, and Hermione rolled her eyes. “Charlie’s in the Order too, but he’s still in Romania,” Ron said. “Dumbledore is keen to have as many wizards in foreign places as possible, so he’s been trying to recruit members from afar.”

Harry was just about to ask why Percy, someone who worked in the Department of International Magical Cooperation at the Ministry of Magic, couldn’t work as a recruiter for members in foreign places when the sound of footsteps made him stop short.

“Uh oh,” George said, hastily shoving the Extendable Ears they hadn’t bothered to use in his pocket. “Gotta go!”

The twins disappeared with two successive cracks. Mrs. Weasley appeared in the doorway moments later.

“Meeting’s over,” she said cheerfully. “You can all come downstairs for dinner, now. Everyone is dying to see you, Harry, especially Sirius.”

Harry felt a thrill of anticipation. He assumed Mrs. Weasley had told everyone in the meeting about his... fabrication, and could imagine the disappointed reaction of his godfather... and worse yet, the affronted response from Snape.

“Good, I’m starved,” Ron said, leading the way and following his mother. “Snape never sticks around for dinner, thank God...”

Harry barely repressed a relieved sigh. Ginny caught his eye and smirked, and it was quiet as they carefully descended the staircase—until Tonks tripped on an umbrella stand, a portrait of a mad woman started screaming, and that, Harry would muse later, had pretty much set the tone for the rest of the evening.

Life at Grimmauld Place was *busy*.

Mrs. Weasley kept them all preoccupied with various tasks, all set upon making the house habitable for human beings. Harry was brought up to speed on all which he was deemed permitted to know, which included the history of this dreadful house they now stayed in. It was where Sirius had grown up, and he abhorred the unplotable building nearly as much as the disturbing, old house-elf named Kreacher that, in Sirius's opinion, was very rude in that he refused to die.

Harry's fondness for his godfather had grown exponentially over the past week. He had, to Harry's great relief, not been angry nor disappointed when he found out Harry had lied about his presentation. In fact, he'd seemed happy—evidently, he had all but demanded that Dumbledore allow him to accompany the other Order members which had been sent to retrieve him, saying that as Harry's guardian it was his duty to be there when Harry went through the change. But Dumbledore had refused, as the Ministry was still after him, saying it was far too risky.

Sirius had also made Harry's affection for him soar on that first evening by bringing up the topic of Voldemort. Were it not for his Godfather, Harry would have been completely in the dark about what had been going on. Now, however, he at least had an idea about what was happening... and none of it was exactly uplifting.

The Prophet was making a mockery of Harry Potter, conveying him as some conceited, unstable nutcase; Voldemort was out there somewhere, lurking in the shadows and recruiting, and the Ministry of Magic—along with Percy Weasley, which was another dramatic subject they all tried to avoid—was keen to ignore the fact that the Dark Lord had risen again.

Then there was the notion of this mysterious weapon.

There was something that Voldemort was intent on getting his hands on, this time around, something he didn't have during the last war...

But Mrs. Weasley had finally ended the discussion at that point, and none of them could even come up with a guess as to what that weapon might be.

As much as that mystery burned in his mind, Harry's thoughts were increasingly preoccupied by his upcoming trial at the Ministry. It was set to happen tomorrow, and Harry, not wanting to talk about it,

sought some solitude. He and the others had just finished a particularly lengthy cleaning mission in which they had uncovered many old, dusty objects, such as a locket no one could open and a music box that made them all sleepy until Ginny had the sense to shut it.

Harry found a door that he had not yet noticed before slightly ajar. Curious, he peeked through the crack, and saw that his godfather was alone inside. He was staring intently at a wall covered in a large, tattered looking tapestry.

“Er,” Harry said tentatively as a way of announcing his presence. “Are you all right, Sirius?”

Sirius looked even more miserable than Harry felt. He shrugged dismally, and Harry suddenly didn’t feel like being completely alone anymore, if it meant he could have some equally melancholy company. He entered the room and closed the door behind him.

“What are you doing?”

“Wallowing, mostly,” Sirius muttered, turning to look at the tapestry again. Harry examined it as well; it was immensely old and looked as though doxies had gnawed at it in places. Still, the golden thread woven into it glinted brightly enough to show a very large, sprawling family tree. It appeared to go back as far as the Middle Ages. At the top of it were the words:

The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black

“Toujours Pur”

“My lovely family,” Sirius explained dryly. “I was trying to get it off the wall earlier, but I suspect my mother has put a permanent sticking charm on it, just like her portrait.”

“Your family?” Harry frowned as he scanned the bottom most layer. There were many names, all of which were accompanied by a small symbol—Harry recognized them as the characters used to represent alpha, beta, and omega. “But you’re not on here!”

“I was.” Sirius pointed towards a spot on the far right where there was a black, singed mark, rather like a cigarette burn. “My dear mother blasted me off after I ran away from home.”

“You ran away from home?”

“Yeah. When I was sixteen, I’d had enough of this place.”

“But... but where did you go?”

Sirius gave him a small grin. “Your grandparents’ house,” he said. “They took me in. Great people, your grandparents. Treated me like a second son. Mrs. Potter said it was a good thing she had experience with reckless alpha males.”

He smiled more wolfishly. Harry looked back towards the tapestry, and as his eyes flickered from name to name, he noticed that there were very few betas...

“The Black family is very proud,” Sirius explained. “The family which, supposedly, produces more alphas and omegas than any other pureblood family... Course, they’re all mixed together at this point, so that’s hardly worth bragging about...”

Harry gaped when his eyes landed on Narcissa Malfoy née Black, then Lucius Malfoy, and then... “You’re related to Draco Malfoy!” he shouted.

“Yeah, that’s what I was saying,” Sirius said, sounding disgusted. “All the pureblood families are related in one way or another. If you want to marry someone from the ‘Sacred 28’—those are the most noble pureblood families, according to some egotistical nutters—then you have very few options.”

Harry continued to look at the names most closely connected to his godfather. “You had a brother,” he said, reading the name Regulus Black—also an alpha.

“And I was reminded all the time what a perfect son he was, unlike me,” Sirius drawled. “He was a pureblood supremacist, just like my parents. He even joined the Death Eaters, stupid idiot.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Nope. Got himself killed, too. We never did find out exactly what happened to him...”

Harry couldn’t tell if Sirius was sad about this or not. He turned his attention back to the tapestry, and Harry’s eyes went even wider when he found the words ‘Bellatrix Black’ sewn into the fabric, indicating that she and Sirius were cousins—and next to it, even more shocking, the symbol for alpha.

“Bellatrix Black is your cousin?” Harry gasped. He had known that they were related, but he hadn’t known that they were so closely related...

“Yes,” Sirius said quietly. It could not have been clearer by his tone that he despised this fact. “Lovely Bellatrix. Never stopped hearing about after she presented. Her parents were just so proud to have a produced a delta. Bellatrix was insufferable, so full of herself—had about six girlfriends at any given time, drove the alpha males in her year mad, I’m sure. Honestly, I think she was just happy to no longer be expected to marry.”

Bellatrix Black was an alpha female. “Why wasn’t I ever told that? When I first heard about her,” Harry snarled. He was beginning to get really sick and tired of just not being informed about things.

“Probably because she is a terrifying thing to talk about in general,” Sirius said, shrugging. “People feared my insane cousin almost as much as they did you-know-who. If you think that alpha males are intimidating, it’s nothing compared to a fury of an alpha female. That’s just how deltas are. They’re more extreme versions of their usual counterparts. Alpha females are naturally skilled with the Dark Arts and such. The Dark Lord personally recruited her after he found out what she was—or so the story goes. Bellatrix was a force to behold during the first war... Though she had no restraint whatsoever. Without the Dark Lord to reign her in, she was out of control. Got herself arrested and tossed into Azkaban before he’d been gone a full week.”

“Alpha females are stronger than alpha males, then?” Harry asked, his voice hedged.

Sirius let out a bark of laughter. “I wouldn’t say that, not necessarily. More naturally skilled with dark magic, perhaps, and even wilder ruts, but that doesn’t mean stronger. Alpha males at least have a bit of self-control and flexibility, and some more than others. Like me, and your father.”

He cast Harry a proud, fond look. “I hope you do present sometime in the next few weeks. I bet your magical signature is going to be exactly like James’. A particularly malleable, extraordinary alpha male.”

But Harry wasn’t so sure. It was a concern that had been lurking in the back of his mind for years, if he was being honest with himself, though he’d never admitted it out loud to anyone.

He decided to do so now. "Sirius... I don't think I'm going to be an alpha," he confessed, looking away. "I... I think I'm a beta."

"Nonsense!" Sirius clapped him on the shoulder, not considering this outcome for a second. "You're just like James. There's no way you won't be an alpha."

"Yeah... but." Harry scratched the back of his head nervously. "I just... In my third year, when Lupin taught me how to cast a patronus, he said it was probably going to be really difficult for me. Because alphas have a harder time with light magic."

"Your father could cast a patronus," Sirius countered at once.

"I know, Lupin told me, but... Well, he said it took him a long time to learn how to do it, and... I learned how to do it really quickly." He looked up at Sirius again, feeling bashful, but knowing he needed to get his point across. "Really quickly."

Sirius contemplated this for a moment, but was shrugging again only a few seconds later. "Probably just because you learned before presenting," he said. "Maybe light magic is easier for unrepresented alphas. Your magic still being young and all that."

"Yeah," Harry murmured. "That's what Remus said, too..."

Harry, however, didn't think it was true. Sirius gave him another bracing smile, but no amount of reassurance would convince Harry otherwise. He had a deep, inexplicable feeling that he was a beta.

This wouldn't have been such a big deal—Harry had never had the fervent desire to be a big, powerful alpha like most of the boys he knew—if it weren't for the fact that everyone else seemed to expect this of him.

He was afraid he would disappoint everyone... his godfather most of all.

"What are we doing, standing in here and staring at this depressing old thing?" Sirius guided Harry towards the door, swatting a hand towards the tapestry as though he were dismissing its existence. At least he had managed to make his godfather feel a bit better, Harry thought. He tried to let this realization lift his dreary spirits.

"Dinner will be soon, and then you should get to bed early tonight, Harry... You'll want to be well-rested for your hearing tomorrow."

Harry's mood crashed right back down to where it had been moments ago. The hearing. The hearing which would determine whether he could return to Hogwarts, after all...

He had a feeling that he would not sleep tonight at all.

Puers

The trial was... unsettling.

As if having the entire thing rescheduled in a last-minute, underhanded attempt to make him miss the affair wasn't bad enough, Harry would have never thought that the Ministry could be so biased against him. They hardly let him speak! And they dismissed his attempts at any explanation whatsoever like he was a stupid child, an ignorant *puer*...

Harry was certain that he would have been expelled, had it not been for the miraculous and unexpected presence of Albus Dumbledore and his surprise witness, Arabella Figg.

The Headmaster had swept in and made quick work of the trial. He'd spoken circles around Fudge in an elegant and witty manner, making the Minister stutter and guffaw his way into admitting Harry's innocence, despite his very best attempts to do otherwise.

Yet it was Dumbledore himself that had left Harry feeling miserable.

Sure, he'd known that the Headmaster would not be *happy* after he learned that Harry had lied about presenting; he expected him to be upset, maybe even angry. Harry thought he'd get a stern talking to. A verbal slap on the wrist.

He certainly hadn't expected Dumbledore to completely *ignore* him.

The Headmaster wouldn't *look* at him! The entire time he addressed the Wizengamot and defended him from expulsion, Dumbledore kept his back to Harry, and even when he addressed him personally did not make eye contact with him.

Then, when it was all said and done, the Headmaster left without so much as a nod in his direction.

Harry was aware that being cleared of all charges and knowing that he would be returning to Hogwarts should have had him in high spirits, but he felt heavy with guilt and shame all day. He had waited until that evening at the Burrow to confess Dumbledore's disquieting behavior to Ron and Hermione, neither of whom managed to make Harry feel any better about the situation.

“He wouldn’t even look at you? Not once?” Hermione had asked, brows knitted together in concern. Harry had nodded, deplorable.

“Wow,” Ron had said after letting out a long, low whistle.

“*Dumbledore* is giving you the cold shoulder? You must have really pissed him off, mate.”

And not even Hermione, brightest witch of her age, could come up with some comforting explanation.

The week following the hearing was dull and exhausting, full of endless housework and cleaning in what felt to be a futile attempt at making Grimmauld Place feel homey. They fought doxies and cleaned floors, they scrubbed grimy walls and polished tarnished silver... Order members came and went, exchanging quick and hushed words with one another, but Harry and the others never could find out any more information about this supposed weapon.

Dumbledore, who had supposedly stopped by once in the dead of night, unbeknownst to any of them, did not come by again.

Harry did not think it possible to feel worse about himself... but then their Hogwarts letters came.

Hermione and Ron, both prefects.

Not Harry.

Harry had honestly forgotten that, going into their fifth year, prefects would be selected—but he was certain that if he had recalled this, he would have assumed that Dumbledore would make him prefect over Ron.

At least, he *would* have assumed that, prior to his giant lie concerning his presentation.

Harry knew it was unfair to assume that this was Dumbledore’s reasoning for not picking him. Was he so arrogant, so conceited as to think that he, Harry, was a better choice than Ron? Who was to say that Dumbledore wouldn’t have chosen Ron anyway; who was he to think that he was superior to his best friend?

But Hermione had seemed equally surprised, and Harry couldn’t help but think that this must be the case. The Headmaster was not merely disappointed with him, he was *furious*.

Mrs. Weasley had nearly cried upon seeing the shining badge that came with her son's Hogwarts letter. All her children, magically mature; Ginny an omega and Ron a prefect. That, and it was nearly Harry's fifteenth birthday—obviously, a party was in order.

A party during which Harry would have had a perfectly miserable time, pretending to be happy for Ron and being genuinely ashamed of himself that he was not... were it not for Fred, George, and, of course, his godfather.

The twins were absolutely disgusted that their youngest brother appeared to be following in *Percy's* footsteps (though they did not say as much within earshot of either of their parents), and had been relieved that Harry, at least, had his priorities straight.

These were sentiments that were shared wholeheartedly with Sirius, who succeeded in making Harry feel better about not being chosen. "Thank Merlin you're not a bloody prefect," he'd said to Harry under his breath at dinner. "If you were, I'd be forced to play the part of proper godfather; lie to you and say I was proud... I wasn't a prefect either, obviously, and neither was your father. We got into a bit too much trouble, Remus was the good boy who got the badge... though we figure it was because Dumbledore hoped that he might reign us in a bit. Didn't work."

"Is that why you think he's chosen Ron, now?" It was a notion that Harry hadn't considered. "To stop *me* from getting into so much trouble?"

"Maybe." They'd both glanced down the table towards Ron, who was blushing as his mother declared once more just how proud he was. Fred had mimed puking under the table, and George and Ginny had both laughed behind their hands. "Let him have this. Soon, you'll be the one impressing everyone. Presenting as an alpha, Quidditch Captain soon, I'll bet—maybe even Head Boy in your seventh year, if you decide to get soft in the end, after all. Just like your dad."

He'd clapped Harry on the shoulder, and suddenly, Harry's smile had become pained and forced once more.

The rest of the summer—much to Harry's relief and Sirius's disappointment—passed without much excitement.

Harry did not present, and before they knew it the first of September had arrived, and they were rushing to the train station to board the

Hogwarts Express—which they were in danger of missing, running as late as they were. Despite Mrs. Weasley’s warnings, Sirius accompanied Harry on his guarded journey (all stern alpha males and a cheerful, omega Tonks) to King’s Cross in the form of a massive, black dog, chasing the train until it turned a corner and he vanished from sight.

Fred and George quickly announced that they needed to find Lee as the train began to move, leaving Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny to themselves. They must have been some the very last students to board the train; the corridor was nearly deserted.

“Guess we should find a compartment then, eh?” Harry said, motioning down the narrow hall.

Hermione and Ron shared a look.

“Er,” said Ron.

“Ron and I are supposed to go into the prefect carriage,” Hermione said awkwardly. Ron wasn’t looking at Harry; he seemed to have become intensely interested in the fingernails on his left hand.

“Oh,” Harry said. “Right. Fine.”

“I don’t think we’ll have to stay there the whole time,” said Hermione quickly. “Our letters said we just get instructions from the Head Boy and Girl and then patrol the corridors from time to time.”

“Fine,” said Harry again. “Well, I might see you later, then.”

“Yeah, definitely,” said Ron, casting an anxious look at Harry. “It’s a pain having to go down there, I’d rather—but we have to—I mean, I’m not enjoying it, I’m not Percy,” he finished defiantly.

“I know you’re not,” Harry said, and he grinned. But as Hermione and Ron dragged their trunks, Crookshanks, and a caged Pigwidgeon off toward the end of the train, Harry felt an odd sense of loss. He had never traveled on the Hogwarts Express without Ron.

“Come on,” Ginny told him, “if we get a move on we’ll be able to save them places.”

Harry nodded and followed her in the opposite direction, Hedwig’s cage in one hand and the handle of his trunk in the other. Ginny was moving rather slowly in front of him, Harry noticed, staring into

compartment windows as though fascinated by the people she spotted inside.

“Wow,” she said quietly. She looked at Harry over her shoulder, smiling. “I know you can’t tell yet, but—sensing everyone’s magic, it’s—it’s...”

What it was, Harry would, evidently, never find out. She shook her head, unable to come up with a word for it.

“Can you tell who is what?” Harry asked in a murmur, intensely curious. She nodded, and Harry didn’t even need to ask before she started telling him all that she could in a low voice as they peered through the compartment windows. “Those Ravenclaws in there, all betas, except the girl on the right side, she’s an omega... This Hufflepuff lot, all betas... More Ravenclaws, betas, but—oh, those two boys are *alphas*—wow.”

Ginny paused, appearing momentarily dazed as her eyes lingered at that window. Harry cleared his throat and she started, blushing furiously and continuing to walk. “S-s-so—oh!”

She stumbled and plowed right into Neville, who had seemingly appeared from nowhere. He was struggling with his trunk and his flighty toad, Trevor, also searching for a compartment. “Sorry,” he mumbled, though it was definitely Ginny who had bumped into *him*. “Just trying to find someplace to sit, all the compartments are full...”

“What about this one?” Ginny nodded towards the door Neville had just past. “This one’s almost empty, it’s just Loony Lovegood in there...”

Neville mumbled something about not wanting to be a bother.

“Oh, don’t be silly! She’s all right. Come on.” Ginny opened the compartment door and dragged her trunk inside, and Harry and Neville followed. “Hi, Luna,” she said. “Do you mind if we sit with you? All the other compartments are full.”

The lone girl sitting by the window looked up. She had long, scraggly blonde hair, pale brows, and huge, light blue eyes that made her look permanently surprised. Harry could understand why Neville was so put-off by her—she gave off a very strange and uncomfortable aura. She kept her wand behind her ear, was wearing a necklace of butterbeer caps, and appeared to be reading a newspaper upside-down. Her huge eyes roved over Ginny and Neville, eventually resting

on Harry when she finally nodded. “Thank you,” Ginny said, grinning.

Harry and Neville stowed the three trunks and Hedwig’s cage safely away in the luggage rack before they all took a seat. “Omega,” Ginny whispered to Harry and Neville discreetly, eyes flickering briefly to the blonde girl.

The girl called Luna Lovegood watched them over her upside-down magazine, which Harry saw was called *The Quibbler*. She seemed to not need to blink as often as normal people; she stared unwaveringly at Harry, who had taken the seat directly in front of her, and was now deeply regretting his decision.

“Have you had a nice summer, Luna?” Ginny asked cheerfully.

“Yes.” Luna had a dreamy, breathy voice. Her wide eyes never left Harry’s when she spoke. “Yes, it was rather lovely, thank you. *You’re* Harry Potter.”

“I know who I am,” Harry said.

Neville laughed under his breath. “And I don’t know who you are,” she continued, eyeing him as well, “but you’re *both* puers.”

Harry was actually glad that she had said it, disdainful as it was—he’d been wondering about Neville since he spotted him, and wasn’t sure if Ginny hadn’t told him about Neville’s magical status because she could not do so without him hearing, thus being rude, or because there was nothing to tell.

Luna did not seem concerned with manners in the slightest, however, and continued to stare at Harry and Neville blatantly.

“Not you, either?” Neville mumbled.

“Nope.”

Neville gave a relived smile. “I thought I might be the only one,” he confessed. “My gran was disappointed it didn’t happen this summer, but said it wasn’t too surprising... I have a late July birthday, see, probably the youngest in our class...”

“Me too,” Harry said. “July what? Mine’s the 31st.”

“The 30th.”

Neville’s smile widened. “Guess I beat you by a whole day, then.”

“This is Neville Longbottom,” Ginny interrupted, gesturing towards him. “Neville, Harry, this is Luna Lovegood. She’s a Ravenclaw in my year.”

Luna’s eyes flickered from Neville for only a moment, but then she looked to Ginny like she was just noticing her properly since she’d stepped into the compartment. “How are you liking being an omega?” she asked bluntly, lowering her newspaper.

Ginny’s face turned a slight tint of pink. “Er, it’s all right, I suppose,” she mumbled. “Just happened about a month ago, so...”

“Was your mother an omega?”

“No.”

Ginny straightened her posture, like she was preparing to be defensive. “Well, *mine* was,” said Luna, “and she told me that being an omega is amazing in ways that are almost indescribable ten percent of the time, and infuriating and dreadful the other ninety percent... But that the ten percent is so good that it nearly makes up for the rest of it. I’m not really sure what she meant by that. Said she’d tell me when I presented, but she died before I did.”

Luna said it all in very level voice, and afterwards stared at Ginny with those unnerving, huge eyes. Ginny’s mouth fell open, unsure what to say. Harry and Neville exchanged an uneasy glance, equally disturbed and confused.

No one, therefore, said anything... and then Luna lifted her newspaper and disappeared behind it again without another word.

It took a long time for Ginny, Harry, and Neville to recover from that disquieting story, but eventually the food trolley came, and the ability to purchase sweets broke the tension nicely.

Nearly an hour had past by the time Hermione and Ron arrived, bringing a mewling Crookshanks and a flustered Pigwidgeon with them. Ron stowed Pigwidgeon’s cage away before plopping down across from Harry and snatching up one of his chocolate frogs. “I’m starving,” he said, ripping it open and biting off its head. Trevor the toad, whom Neville was holding firmly in his lap, let out a deep croak as though it were offended.

“How was it, then?” Harry asked, shifting aside so that Hermione could have some room as well. She sat next to him, allowing

Crookshanks to curl up in her lap.

“Well. There are two new prefects from each house, boy and girl,” she explained, looking disgruntled.

“Yeah,” said Ron. “Take a wild guess at who the Slytherin prefect is.”

“Malfoy,” Harry said at once, his fear was confirmed.

“And that’s not the worst of it,” Ron said gravely. He took another bite of his chocolate frog, much more aggressively this time.

“Malfoy’s presented, too,” Hermione explained, as Ron’s mouth was now preoccupied, chewing angrily. “He’s an *alpha*.”

Harry’s stomach dropped.

It wasn’t that he was *surprised* by either of these facts. He’d figured that Malfoy would be made prefect the moment he bothered to dwell on it. Harry was also, begrudgingly, unsurprised that Malfoy had presented as an alpha. Malfoy had been bragging about what a powerful alpha his *father*, *grandfather*, *great-grandfather*, and so on and so forth had been since their very first year.

Of course, that didn’t mean that Harry hadn’t been the tiniest bit hopeful that he would be wrong. How satisfying it would have been if Malfoy, after all that talk about how amazing the Malfoy alphas were, had transpired to be a common, normal beta.

But even all that wasn’t why Harry was feeling like he’d just been doused in cold water. It wasn’t that Malfoy turned out to be an alpha, just as he’d assumed he would...

It was that Malfoy had presented, and Harry hadn’t.

“He was the only new prefect who was an alpha,” Hermione continued quickly when she noticed Harry’s expression, as though hoping to change the topic. “Pansy Parkinson, that complete cow, was somehow made prefect, too... and she’s a beta.”

“Who else was made prefect?” Harry asked.

“Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbot from Hufflepuff,” Ron answered though a mouthful of chocolate, “and Anthony Goldstein and Padma Patil from Ravenclaw.”

“You took Padma Patil to the Yule Ball.”

Luna had lowered her newspaper again. Her unsettling stare was now fixed on Ron, who blinked at her in surprise.

"I... yeah, I know," he said slowly.

"She didn't like it very much," Luna informed him. "Said you treated her badly, that you wouldn't dance with her... I don't think I would have minded, if it were me. I don't much like dancing."

She stared at him for a moment longer, then lifted the paper once more, abruptly ending what was hardly a conversation to begin with. Ron looked about at Harry, Neville, and Ginny as though waiting for an explanation on their strange compartment companion.

"Hermione, Ron, this is Luna Lovegood," Ginny said through a thinly concealed giggle. "A Ravenclaw from my year."

Luna turned the page of her newspaper and didn't acknowledge the introduction.

"...Right," Ron said. He shook his head, bemused, then checked his watch. "We're supposed to patrol the corridors every so often," he explained. "We can hand out punishments, too, if people are misbehaving. I can't wait to get Crabbe and Goyle for something... I'll make Crabbe do lines, he'll hate that, he can barely write."

"You aren't supposed to abuse your power, Ron!" Hermione chastised.

"Yeah, right, because Malfoy definitely won't abuse his," Ron said sarcastically.

"So that means your just going to stoop to his level?"

"No, it just means I'm going to get his mates before he gets mine."

Hermione rolled her eyes but didn't yell at him again. Ron grabbed another chocolate frog and began eating it with gusto.

They had just begun to get into a relatively normal conversation (one from which Luna remained disengaged, reading *The Quibbler* silently in the corner), discussing who they thought the new Defense professor might be like, when the compartment door slid open for the third time.

Just because Harry had anticipated it did not make the appearance of Draco Malfoy any more welcoming. He stood in the doorway with

Crabbe and Goyle flanking him on either side, looking supremely haughty.

“What?” Harry said sharply before he could say anything.

Malfoy looked down at him with cool, silver eyes, his platinum blonde hair slicked back and a shiny prefect’s badge pinned to his chest—a silver serpent with a P.

Even if the fleeting moment they made eye contact, Harry couldn’t help but notice that there was something undeniably... different about Malfoy. It wasn’t just his posture or his even more arrogant than usual expression, either. His pointed features were more defined, his jawline hardened. He had a sense of *something* about him that made Harry’s heart race faster, despite his current inability to perceive magical signatures.

Evidently, he was not the only one. Ginny physically jumped when she looked at him, causing Ron to instantly lean forward in front of her protectively, and Neville’s face paled as Trevor hid in his lap. Even Luna, who had been so detached from the rest of them, reacted—she dropped the newspaper and stared at Malfoy with eyes that were wider than usual.

Malfoy’s lips curled at the subtle but nonetheless obvious reactions. His eyes flickered over everyone in the compartment, lingering for a moment on Luna and Ginny before landing once more on Harry’s. “Careful, Potter,” he murmured, “or I might be forced to put you in detention. You see, I, unlike you, am a prefect, which means I, unlike you, have the power to hand out punishments.”

“Yeah,” Harry spat, “but you, unlike me, are a git, so get lost.”

Hermione, Ron, and Ginny laughed, but Draco hardly looked affected. He leaned against the doorway, crossing his arms like he was making himself comfortable. “This is almost sweet,” he said, looking around at the others. “Two omegas, two betas, and two *puers*...”

Harry felt his face burning, and a quick glance at Neville showed that he, too, was turning red. “You know,” Malfoy drawled, “as Slytherin prefect, I now have a duty to be aware of what my fellow students are up to, especially those in our own year, and I’ve already been taking that responsibility very seriously. I’ve been up and down the corridor three times now, and you know what’s absolutely *amazing* about our fellow fifth years, Potter?”

He glanced at Hermione and Ron when Harry said nothing. “No? They haven’t told you? As it transpires, everyone else has presented. Every. Single. One... Well, besides Longbottom, here, if you count him.”

Malfoy’s eyes flashed as Harry processed this. He and Neville were... were the only *puers* left in their entire year...

“So what?” Hermione snapped. “It hardly matters.”

Malfoy ignored her. “Maybe that’s why Weasley was chosen as prefect over you, Potter,” he sneered. “He’s more *mature*.”

Hermione got to her feet. “Get out!”

“I seem to have touched a nerve,” Malfoy said, smirking. “You’d best watch yourself, Potter... Just because you’re a innocent little *puer* doesn’t mean I won’t be *dogging* your footsteps to make sure you don’t step out of line...”

Sniggering, he gave Harry one last, condescending look before departing, Crabbe and Goyle trailing behind him as he went. Harry glanced at Hermione after she slammed the door shut, and he could tell at once that she, like him, had registered what Malfoy had just said and had been unnerved by it.

Suddenly, Sirius having accompanied him to the train station seemed such a reckless, stupid thing to do.

But they couldn’t talk about that with Luna and Neville in the compartment. Harry glowered and stared out the window.

“Well,” Neville said in a small voice. He smiled nervously at Harry, struggling to keep a suddenly very active toad contained in his hands. “At least we’re unrepresented together.”

Harry shrugged and said nothing. Being the only *puer* left in their year with just *Neville Longbottom* did next to nothing to make him feel better.

Highs and Lows

Harry was beginning to wish he had been expelled and was back at Grimmauld Place with Sirius, after all.

Hagrid was gone. He and the odd omega girl, Luna Lovegood, were having the same hallucination of creepy black winged horses which pulled the carriages to the castle. The Sorting Hat was belting out warnings of imminent peril. The Headmaster would still not make eye contact with him. Seamus had declared that he thought Harry a liar, turning his dorm room—which used to be a refuge—into a place Harry hated to sleep in. Everywhere he went, people whispered about him behind their hands.

Harry was cursing himself for not expecting such reactions; of course everyone thought he was crazy. Two months ago, he had emerged from the maze of the Triwizard Tournament with Cedric Diggory's dead body in his arms, declaring that Lord Voldemort was back. There had not been time to properly explain what had happened—not that Harry would have been up to the task at that point—before everyone went home, where they then spent two months reading about how Dumbledore was losing his marbles and Harry was an attention-seeking, immature boy...

An insult which was doubly painful, now.

The knowledge that there were only two fifth-year students left who had not yet presented, and the knowledge of *who* those two students were spread like wildfire—no doubt at the assistance of Draco Malfoy. Everyone, even the younger students, knew that Harry Potter and Neville Longbottom were still puers, and Harry could not be certain if the whisperings he endured were mocking him because they thought him crazy, or because he was immature.

Even some of the staff were insufferable on this account. Harry swore that every time Sprout's gaze landed on him, her expression softened, and she spoke in a kinder voice to him than she did to the other students when they asked questions—like she was addressing a child. Trelawney interpreted his made-up dream of walking through the Forbidden Forest alone as a prediction that he was at great risk to die a horrible and dramatic death before he ever presented.

And Snape being Snape, had found a new way to torment Harry once he saw that it was only he and Neville Longbottom that were

unpresented.

On their very first potions class—after the anticipated, dire warnings about how horrid this year was going to be, what with their O.W.L.s approaching—Snape had told them all to divide into pairs for this first draught they would be working on, the Draught of Peace. Before Harry could claim Ron or Hermione, Snape had intervened.

“Ah, Potter... Why don’t you pair up with Longbottom here? This is a complex draught, it only seems fair and appropriate that I make sure my students work with partners who are at similar levels of... maturity.”

Harry could *still* hear Parkinson’s shrill laughter ringing in his ears; he could *still* see Malfoy’s smug, arrogant grin. Now, every time they worked in pairs in potions class, Harry had to work with Neville—who, while good-natured and kind, was absolutely dreadful in the subject. His outright fear of Snape did not help matters, either. His anxiety paired with Harry’s unending bitterness and incensed thoughts, which often made him lose focus, resulted in mediocre brews on good days, and small explosions, melted cauldrons, and forty points from Gryffindor on one particularly bad Thursday.

Harry’s constant unease and very short temper had more than the obvious unpleasant results. Professor McGonagall, his Head of House and therefore the one who was responsible for him, made him stay behind after her lessons twice to ask if he needed to go to the hospital wing... Which was a much less mortifying way of asking if he’d been examining his genitalia regularly and was developing bulbis glandis, therefore on the verge of presenting.

But this was not the case. Harry’s sour mood had nothing at all to do with magical maturation—as much as he wished this was the case—and everything to do with how terrible life was. Even so, a short temper was one of the last stages before alpha presentation. He would have noticed an interesting addition growing between his legs first, as well as muscle pains and sleeplessness, and Harry had experienced none of those. Quite the opposite, in fact; the lack of sleep he’d been getting in his attempts to finish homework late at night left him feeling like he would pass out mid-step during the day.

Maybe Harry could have endured all of this—the teasing, the lack of sleep, McGonagall’s awkward concern, Snape being Snape, Dumbledore’s cold anger—even Hermione’s new hobby of underhandedly freeing house elves, and Fred and George’s constant

experimentation on first-years which was often questionable and distracting in the common room. Maybe he could have persevered with the knowledge that someday he would present, and someday they would all know the truth, that the Dark Lord was back and he was not a crazy, attention-seeking liar...

But then there was Umbridge.

Umbridge, one of the witches who was on the Wizengamot during his trial. Umbridge, with her unnerving, giant eyes and toad-like mouth.

Umbridge, the devil in pink.

Their new Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor was about as likely to teach them defensive magic as she was to admit that she was *actually* part toad—and Harry did strongly suspect. Their first lesson had certainly set the tone for the rest of the school year. There would be no disruptive nonsense, there would be no talking—wands away, take your books out and keep your heads down, please.

Except Harry wasn't any good at keeping his head down, especially not after Hermione had pointed out that Umbridge's course aims did not include practicing spells. When the fragmented conversation between their professor and various students came to a head; when Umbridge had announced to the entire class that Cedric Diggory's death was a *tragic accident*, that the Dark Lord was *not* back, and they had *no* reason to fear being attacked by *anyone*—especially not young puers like yourself, Mr. Potter—

Harry had lost it.

His outburst had earned him a week's worth of detentions, the likes of which were sickening.

I must not tell lies.

Harry wondered if the words would ever fade from the back of his hand.

He was just on his way back to the common room after his third detention, the first one to not go late into the night. The previous two sessions of hand-mutilation had gone on until well past midnight, forcing Harry to stay up incredibly late to finish the excessive amounts of homework every professor seemed intent on giving them.

This detention, however, ended after only two hours. Harry's hand

had begun to bleed profusely at that point, causing him to pause in his writing and for Umbridge to look up.

“Ah,” she’d said softly. “Good, that ought to serve as a reminder to you, oughtn’t it? You may leave for the night.”

...But he still had to go back tomorrow, which meant he would still miss the Quidditch tryouts for whoever their new Keeper might be.

Harry would have thought it impossible for there to be another professor he hated more than Snape, but he thought that Umbridge—who had already earned the title of The Beta Bitch in certain Gryffindor circles—just might manage the task. *She’s evil*, he thought as he climbed the stairs toward the Gryffindor common room, *she’s an evil, twisted, vile—*

“Ron?”

He had reached the top of the stairs, turned, and almost walked into Ron, who was lurking behind a statue of Lachlan the Lanky, clutching his broomstick. He jumped when he saw Harry and attempted to hide his new Cleansweep Eleven behind his back.

“What are you doing?” Ron asked.

“Er—nothing. What are you doing?” Harry countered. When Ron didn’t immediately answer, Harry tried again. “Come on, you can tell me! What are you hiding here for?”

“I’m—I’m hiding from Fred and George, if you must know. They just went past with a bunch of first years, I bet they’re testing stuff on them again, I mean, they can’t do it in the common room now, can they, not with Hermione there.”

Ron was talking in a very fast, feverish way. “But what have you got your broom for, you haven’t been flying, have you?” Harry asked.

“I—well, okay, I’ll tell you, but don’t laugh, all right?” Ron said defensively, turning redder with every second. “I-I thought I’d try out for Gryffindor Keeper now I’ve got a decent broom. There. Go on. Laugh.”

“I’m not laughing,” said Harry. “It’s a brilliant idea! It’d be really cool if you got on the team! I’ve never seen you play Keeper, are you good?”

"I'm not bad," Ron said, looking immensely relieved at Harry's reaction. "Charlie, Fred, and George always made me Keep for them when they were training during the holidays."

"So you've been practicing tonight?"

"Every evening since Tuesday... just on my own, though. I've been trying to bewitch Quaffles to fly at me, but it hasn't been easy and I don't know how much use it'll be." Ron looked anxious. "Fred and George are going to laugh themselves stupid when I turn up for the tryouts. They haven't stopped taking the mickey out of me since I got made a prefect."

"I wish I was going to be there," said Harry bitterly, as they set off together toward the common room.

"Yeah, so do—Harry, what's that on the back of your hand?"

Harry, who had just scratched his nose with his free right hand, tried to hide it, but had as much success as Ron with his Cleansweep. "It's just a cut—it's nothing—it's—"

But Ron had grabbed Harry's forearm and pulled the back of Harry's hand up level with his eyes. There was a pause, during which he stared at the words carved into the skin, then he released Harry, looking sick. "I thought you said she was giving you lines?"

Harry hesitated, but after all, Ron had been honest with him, so he told Ron the truth about the hours he had been spending in Umbridge's office.

"The old hag!" Ron said in a revolted whisper as they came to a halt in front of the Fat Lady, who was dozing peacefully with her head against her frame. "She's sick! Go to McGonagall, say something!"

"No," Harry said at once. "I'm not giving her the satisfaction of knowing she's got to me."

"Got to you? You can't let her get away with this!"

"I don't know how much power McGonagall's got over her," Harry said.

"Dumbledore, then, tell Dumbledore!"

"No."

“Why not?”

“He’s got enough on his mind,” Harry muttered, but that was not the real reason. He was not going to go to Dumbledore for help when Dumbledore had not spoken to him once since last June.

“Well, I reckon you should,” Ron argued, but when Harry shook his head, he didn’t press the point. He muttered the password and the Fat Lady, seemingly without waking, caused the painting to swing open, and they went up to their dorm room where all the other occupants were already asleep. Harry, mentally and physically exhausted, did not even bother to change into his pajamas before he fell on top of his bed and joined them in slumber.

At five o’clock the next day, Harry made his way down to Umbridge’s office for what he sincerely hoped was his last time ever. The only consolation he could think of was that he might be able to see some of the tryouts from the window, and that she might not keep him too long if his hand started bleeding very much, very soon.

They were very grim rays of light, that was true, but Harry was desperate for any sort of silver lining. He took a great breath and knocked on her door, bracing himself for the evening.

“Come in,” came Umbridge’s sickly sweet voice. She smiled at him from behind her desk. “You know what to do, Mr. Potter.”

Harry took his seat, and under the pretense of getting closer to the desk, managed it—he had shifted a few inches to the right, and now had a clear view of the Quidditch pitch through the window.

I must not tell lies. A searing pain before the skin barely healed over.

I must not tell lies.

I must not tell lies.

By the third line, the cuts didn’t heal. Umbridge made no indication that she would be telling him to stop anytime soon. Harry grit his teeth and kept writing.

He looked up whenever he dared, such as when he heard Umbridge open a drawer or put quill to paper, but was unable to see who each person was as they flew during tryouts. The first person was terrible; Harry hoped it wasn’t Ron.

I must not tell lies.

The second was okay, the fourth brilliant... but was it Ron who had just made that amazing catch, or someone else...?

I must not tell lies.

By the time the sixth potential Keeper took to the air, it was beginning to get dark. He doubted he would be able to see the seventh and eighth contenders at all...

Eventually, the tryout came to an end, and Harry had no idea who might have won.

He continued to write and bleed.

“Let’s see if the message has sunk in a bit deeper this time, shall we?” Umbridge said about half an hour later. She walked around to stand next to Harry, and just as she grabbed his wrist to examine the weeping words there, pain seared not across his hand, but on his forehead. Harry winced, his scar burning with a familiar feel.

“Yes, it hurts, doesn’t it?”

Umbridge was looking at him with her wide mouth stretched into a terrible grin. Harry stared, his heart racing. Was she talking about his hand, or did she know, was she aware of the stinging pain on his forehead?

“Well, I think I’ve made my point. You may go, Mr. Potter.”

It took a great amount of effort to force himself to stay calm. Harry waited until he was far enough from her office that she would not be able to see him, then broke out in a run towards the Gryffindor common room.

He shouted the password, and when the portrait swung open, was met with a roar of sound. Ron ran towards him, grinning merrily with a butterbeer in his hands. “I’ve done it!” he declared. “I’ve made Keeper for the team!”

“Oh—brilliant!” Harry said, forcing a grin despite his still rapidly beating heart.

“Here, have a butterbeer.” Ron shoved a cold drink into his hand and led him further into the common room. “I still can’t believe it—

where's Hermione gone?"

"She's over there," Fred answered. He pointed towards an armchair where Hermione sat, nodding off with a drink in her hand that was on the verge of spilling.

"Well, she seemed excited for me earlier," Ron said, sounding disheartened.

"Let her sleep," said George quickly. Harry noticed that there were many first-years around who looked like they had just suffered severe nosebleeds.

"Come here, Ron, let's see if Oliver's old robes fit you," Katie Bell called. "We can just change the name to say yours instead..."

Ron followed her, and Harry made his way over to Hermione. She woke with a start when he set his bag down and spilled some of her butterbeer. "Oh, Harry, hello. Good about Ron, eh?" she said before cleaning the mess she'd made with a spell. "Sorry, I'm just so tired; I stayed up late last night making hats for the house elves... they've been disappearing like mad!"

Harry looked around, and now that he looked properly, could see many of Hermione's poorly knitted, woolen hats peaking out beneath cushions or hidden under pillows.

"Great," Harry said distractedly. His mind was still reeling with what had just occurred with Umbridge; if he did not tell someone soon he might explode. He leaned in and lowered his voice. "Listen..."

He reiterated the entire, disquieting interaction. Hermione frowned afterwards, looking disturbed but thoughtful. "So... You're worried that You-Know-Who is controlling her, like he did Quirrel?"

"Well, it's a possibility, isn't it?"

"Maybe... but he has a body now, Harry, he wouldn't need to use someone else like that, as a host... Though I suppose he could have her under the Imperius..."

They talked under their breaths for a few moments, and when Hermione gave him the same advice as Ron—tell Dumbledore—Harry had the same response.

"No," he said flatly. "I'm not bothering Dumbledore with this, he has

enough going on—”

“I think Dumbledore would *want* to be bothered by this, Harry.”

“Yeah,” Harry scoffed. “Because that’s the only part of me that Dumbledore cares about, isn’t it? My scar.”

“Don’t say that, you know that’s not true!”

“I think I’ll write Sirius, see what he thinks—”

“Harry, you can’t put information like that in a letter!” Hermione shouted, looking alarmed. “What if it got intercepted? Remember what Moody told us, we have to be careful what we put in writing!”

“Fine, fine!” Harry yelled. “I won’t tell him, then.” He grabbed his bag and stood. “I’m going to bed. Tell Ron for me, will you?”

“Oh, no,” Hermione said, to his surprise. “If you’re going to bed, that means I can go without being rude, too. I’m so exhausted, and I want to get up early and work on making more hats tomorrow. Do you want to help? I can teach you! I’m getting much better, I can even make designs and bobbles and things!”

She looked so genuinely excited that Harry tried to look like he was genuinely tempted by the offer so as not to hurt her feelings. “Er... no, sorry,” he said. “Better not, I’ve got loads of homework to catch up on...”

He slowly backed away and made his way up to the boys’ dorm, leaving Hermione looking slightly put-out behind him.

Less than twelve hours later, and Harry was breaking his word to Hermione.

He lay in bed for a long moment, simply relishing the fact that it was Saturday, then got up and quickly dressed before the rest of his dorm mates could wake. He wrote a letter to Sirius in a blissfully empty common room, and took a moment to appreciate the slyness of his words.

Dear Snuffles,

Hope you’re okay, the first week back here’s been terrible, I’m really glad it’s the weekend. We’ve got a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Umbridge. She’s nearly as nice as your mum. I’m writing because

that thing I wrote to you about last summer happened again last night when I was doing a detention with Umbridge. We're all missing our biggest friend, we hope he'll be back soon.

Please write back quickly. Best,

Harry

For such a short letter, it had taken a considerably long time to write. Harry read it several times, brows furrowed, and could not see how anyone from the outside could possibly know who or what he was talking about. Feeling satisfied, he went to the owlery and sent it off with Hedwig before Hermione or Ron could talk some sense into him and stop him.

A task which should have been uneventful, except Harry happened to catch sight of one of those massive, black, reptilian horses leaping from the treetops, flying in a great circle before disappearing beneath the foliage again. It scared him so badly that he'd nearly knocked poor Cho Chang over on his way out of the owlery.

She'd opened her mouth to say something, too, but Harry found himself immediately unwilling to be locked in a conversation with the girl who had been dating Cedric Diggory. He knew that if *anyone* had the right to ask him questions about what happened it was her, and with as stressed as he was these days, he didn't think that he could handle talking about Cedric.

Harry rushed past her and made his way down to breakfast, forcing such thoughts away and looking forward to finally flying. That afternoon would be their first Quidditch practice of the season, but where Harry was excited, Ron was anxious. They went down to the pitch early to get some extra flying time in, ignoring Hermione's awful warnings that they would fail all of their O.W.L.'s if they continually put their homework off.

About ten minutes in, Harry wondered whether their morning would have been better spent doing homework, after all.

Ron performed *terribly*. Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Zabini, Parkinson, and a slew of Slytherin girls Harry did not know the names of were sitting in the stands, jeering and cat-calling the entire time. Ron let in a dozen goals and knocked into Katie Bell so badly that he gave her a nosebleed; Fred and George tried to make the situation better with one of the experimental pills but ended up making it worse. Practice ended less than an hour after it had begun, and Harry was sure that

Ron, just like him, had a hard time getting the ringing chorus of ‘Gryffindor are losers’ out of his head the rest of the night.

Sunday was dedicated entirely to finishing homework. Along with a good number of other students, Harry, Ron, and Hermione spent the afternoon in the common room, having procured their favorite armchairs. Ron and Harry were both working on a dreadfully long essay for Transfiguration. Hermione, having completed her homework the day before, busied herself by magically knitting more elf clothes. Harry had to admit that she was improving. They looked significantly more like actual hats rather than ‘woolly bladders’, as Ron had tactlessly referred to them once.

By the time six o’clock rolled around, Harry’s brain felt like someone had been beating it with a sledgehammer, and he hadn’t even started his Astronomy essay yet. He had been staring vacantly at his parchment, his mind numb and having not written anything in the past five minutes—he was daydreaming about roast beef, mashed potatoes, and whatever else would be for dinner—when he was startled out of his stupor.

“Oi! What do you think you’re doing!?”

Ron had slammed his text book shut. Harry was just about to say ‘I didn’t do it’ when he realized that Ron was not talking to him.

A redheaded girl who’d been walking by looked equally confused for a moment before she raised her brows at him. A moment later, Harry realized this girl was Ginny.

She looked different.

Her hair, which she usually wore in a low, scraggly ponytail, was loose around her shoulders—a cascade of fiery waves. She was wearing make-up, and her clothes were different, and she had on shoes with heels on them, and, well...

She looked good.

“What?” she said.

“What? What is all—is all this!?” Ron gestured wildly at her body, raising his voice and causing a few people to turn and look. “What’s all over your face, and where’d you get shoes like that!?”

“Oh,” said Ginny, and her face colored slightly. “I was, um, sort of...

attacked earlier,” she mumbled under her breath. Her eyes flashed quickly to Harry. “D’you like it?”

Ron’s face was turning red, too, but Harry knew it was out of anger. Before any of them could say anything else, a few other girls came strolling down the stairs which led to the girls’ dorms, and everyone’s focus shifted to them.

Even being unrepresented, Harry could tell they were omegas.

One he knew—Fay Dunbar, a brunette girl with deep blue eyes in their own year—but the others he did not; they must have been sixth or seventh years. One was short and fair, with honey-blond hair that fell to her waist and bright, hazel eyes, and the other was tall, tan, and if Harry had to pick one word to describe her, it would be *fierce*.

Her dark, curly hair was like a lion’s mane, and her eyes were dark and heavily hooded. She walked with the other two trailing behind her, and she headed straight towards Ginny.

“Ginevra,” she said, putting a hand on her shoulder. She glanced fleetingly towards Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Hermione’s levitating knitting, which came to an abrupt pause. The expression that formed on her face reminded Harry very much of Narcissa Malfoy—like she smelled something bad. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes! F-fine, Erwin,” Ginny stuttered.

“Ginevra, *darling*, I told you. You *must* call me Godiva.”

“Did *you* do this?” Ron interjected loudly. He shoved his homework aside and got to his feet, pointing at Ginny like his sister wearing make-up was a monstrosity.

“You mean, did we give your sister a bit of a make-over?” the tan girl—Godiva Erwin, evidently—said coolly. “Yes. We did. Is that a problem...whoever you are?”

“Ronald Weasley,” Ron said. “And yes! That’s my sister!”

“Merlin,” the blonde girl said. Her eyes flashed up and down Ron’s body before turning her attention to Ginny, looking thoroughly disappointed on her behalf. “I’m so sorry you’re related to that, Ginevra.”

Ron turned a brilliant shade of crimson.

“Well... *Ronald*,” Erwin drawled, saying Ron’s name like it was a disgusting word that left a bad taste in her mouth. Harry noticed that everyone in the common room was watching with rapt attention now. “Your sister is an omega, and in Gryffindor house, we pride ourselves on being the best of the best.” She pulled Ginny closer to her. “Come along, Ginevra... you’re one of us, now. See you around, betas... *Puer*.”

She smirked at Harry, who instantly glowered. The other omega girls giggled, and when Erwin turned to leave they followed along at her heels. Ginny, after casting Harry a somewhat apologetic look, left with them.

Ron was gaping at them as they went, and Harry saw that he was not the only one. It seemed that most of the common room was unable to keep their eyes off them as they made their way through the portrait hole, and a few older boys, Harry noted, had gone completely slack-jawed.

“That shouldn’t be allowed, that,” Ron muttered fiercely, flinging himself back down into his seat.

“What, wearing make-up?” Hermione asked. “They weren’t doing anything wrong, Ron...”

“Not doing—how can you—oh, they’re just *lucky* that Fred and George weren’t around—when *they* see her, they’ll...”

What Fred and George would do when they saw their younger sister in eyeliner, Ron seemed unsure. He crossed his arms and changed tactics when he couldn’t think of anything. “And they shouldn’t be allowed to—to walk around in packs like that,” he grumbled.

“They do seem to be quite the distraction,” Hermione murmured. She was right; many of the male occupants of the common room were *still* starry-eyed. “But it isn’t like—”

“Watch it, Thomas!”

“Ow—What’s your problem, Jackson?”

“You just shoved me!”

“I did not, you were just in the way—But I *will*, if you don’t move—”

Harry had barely turned to see what the newest commotion was when

it had escalated to perilous proportions—Dean Thomas and a boy Harry didn't know, someone tall and broad-shouldered, were both drawing their wands, suddenly at each other's throats. Everyone recoiled at the sight, like something tangible had just pressed on them and forced them to withdraw. Even Harry felt it, slightly—the sinister energy bristling between two alpha males.

“Stop it, stop it right now!” Hermione shouted, jumping up and boldly going to stand between them. Her stationary knitting needles fell to the ground behind her.

“Get out of the way, Granger, or I'll hex you, too—”

“And end up with a week's worth of detentions if you do, Dean!” Hermione snarled, pointing with her thumb towards her prefect's badge. “Now put your wands away, both of you.”

The two boys were glowering, their eyes narrowed as they glared at each other and then Hermione, weighing their options. After a few tense seconds, Dean pocketed his wand. “I'm going to dinner,” he muttered, and he left without another word, shoving aside a petrified looking second-year as he went.

“Anyone else want to cause a scene?” Hermione asked smartly. “Good,” she said when the other boy—Jackson—scoffed but otherwise no one responded. She put her wand away and returned to her seat next to Ron and Harry.

It seemed to be the cue to leave Gryffindor common room. Everyone slowly began to trickle out after that, and it was not long before Harry, Hermione, and Ron were left alone.

“Sodding omegas and alphas,” Ron snapped once the last student had left through the portrait hole. “Just having them around, with their *magical signatures*, they're just so—so distracting! And they feed off each other, did you see that? You can't tell me that other bloke and Dean didn't just have a row because they weren't hopped up on omega energy. I think I have magical whiplash.”

“It's not like they can help it, Ron,” Hermione said carefully, glancing at Harry as she retrieved her knitting needles and yarn from the floor and put them away.

“Oh.” Ron looked at Harry like he'd quite forgotten he was there. “Right. Sorry.”

“For what? I’m not an *anything* yet,” Harry muttered. “I wish I knew what it was you were talking about... Magical energies and all that.”

Ron pursed his lips, clearly trying to figure out some way to explain it. “They’re like... Omegas, well, their magic is sort of... Uh... Well, *alphas*, theirs is *definitely* more like... Hm.” He was silent for a long moment before he finally shrugged. “It’s difficult to explain,” he concluded.

“Wow, that was extremely helpful. Thank you, Ron,” Harry said sarcastically.

“Oh, I know!” said Hermione suddenly. “They’re both very attention-grabbing, alpha and omega magical energies, but in completely opposite manners. Think of them as different kinds of colors. Imagine omegas as pastels. Very light, pleasant hues. They draw you in with a sort of softness and beauty. And alphas are more like dark, bold primaries. Very jarring, and much more forceful.”

She looked at Ron with wide eyes, waiting for his approval. “And what are betas, then? Gray?” he said reproachfully.

“What? No, of course not...” Hermione frowned, but brightened with determination a second later. “Okay, how about this. Omegas are like really evocative, classical music, with lots of delicate intricacies that kind of enchant you, whereas alphas are like—like heavy metal, or something.”

“And us betas are what—elevator music?”

“No! Oh, shut up, Ron. At least I’m trying to come up with something. You do better, then.”

“Okay,” Ron said, leaning forward on his elbows. “Omegas are like a really high-pitched note, a treble—it sort of makes your spine tingle and hits you in the teeth, you know? And then alphas are a deep bass, reverberating, the kind you feel in the pit of your stomach, almost. They’re the highs and low. And then betas, well. We’re mid-tones. Much more comfortable and varied.”

He grinned and glanced at Hermione. He looked very proud of himself. “That’s good, isn’t it?”

“Sort of piggy-backing off my music analogy, but yes, it is good,” Hermione admitted.

Harry shook his head. He did not feel very enlightened at all. “Come on,” he said, putting his schoolwork away. “Let’s hurry up and get some dinner, we’ll finish these essays after...”

The rest of the evening continued in a series of dramatic events.

Ginny was sitting at the end of the Gryffindor table with the other omega girls, something which Ron informed him seemed to be a practice at every table—the omegas at Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin all clustered together, too.

This was not the case for alpha males, though. If anything, they avoided each other, with a few notable exceptions. Zabini and Malfoy seemed to tolerate each other, for example, and Ron kept grumbling about them because he was convinced they (as well as every other alpha male in the hall) were looking at Ginny and her new ‘friends’.

Harry disagreed but didn’t say anything. In fact, he had accidentally made eye contact *himself* with Draco three times, who was always smirking haughtily, his gray eyes gleaming.

After dinner, their copious amounts of homework had Harry and Ron working late into the night, where Hermione joined them and continued to make as many elf hats as she could. The otherwise quiet ambience of having the common room to themselves again was disrupted by an owl. Hermes had unexpectedly arrived, carrying a letter from none other than Percy.

Percy Weasley had quite the opinion on Harry Potter, Albus Dumbledore, and, most disgusting of all, Dolores Umbridge.

In a wonderfully violent display of friendship, Ron had shredded the letter to pieces and tossed it in the fireplace... which soon thereafter took on the form of Sirius’s head, startling the flames out of all of them.

It hadn’t been the kind of uplifting conversation Harry had been pining for. After admitting that he had written his Godfather after all, he, Hermione, and Ron had gathered around the fireplace and spoken for as long as they dared. Sirius didn’t seem to think that Umbridge was a Death Eater, though he did tell them about how her poor teaching techniques didn’t surprise him. Evidently, Minister Fudge suspected that Dumbledore was raising an army within Hogwarts, and the last thing he wanted was for them to learn more spellwork. Harry had to agree with Ron’s sentiments on the subject—it was the

stupidest thing he'd ever heard.

But the worst part of the conversation was how it had ended. Sirius suggested that he take on the form of a dog again and meet them in Hogsmeade, to which Harry and Hermione had both instantly refused. Sirius Black had been mentioned in the *Prophet*, Malfoy had something—it was just too much of a risk.

“You’re less like your father than I thought,” Sirius had said coldly, his ember eyes focused on Harry. “The risk would’ve been what made it fun, for James.”

And with a short goodbye, he had gone, leaving the flames empty and Harry’s heart feeling even more so.

Harry was cold, shaking, and covered in blood.

He had nightmares of his traumatic experiences often, it was true, but rarely did his subconscious bring him back to the Chamber of Secrets.

He felt so small and weak. There was blood pouring out of a wound on his arm and Ginny was laying next to him, her skin stark white against the black stones...

She was dying.

Ginny was dying and so was he. Harry blinked, trying to adjust his glasses on his face so he might see better, but it was no use. His vision was fading already.

“Basilisk venom,” came the smooth, low voice of a boy who was not real.

Tom Riddle was striking, even as a memory, even without a complete body. His full lips curled up on one side into a crooked, sardonic smile as he stood over Harry. “You may have killed my basilisk, but it doesn’t matter... *You* don’t matter.”

He started walking around him, his dark gaze fixated on Harry’s face, darting back and forth between his eyes and scar almost hungrily. “Look at you... In so many ways, we are so similar. Both half-bloods, both forced to be raised by filthy muggles... and I’m certain, in due time, you would have presented as an exceptionally powerful alpha male, just as I did...”

Riddle paused in his prowling. He crouched down so that he was unnervingly close, examining Harry's face with unconcealed interest. Harry's heart was hammering in his chest; this was not how this went, this was not what happened...

This nightmare was an invention of his own subconscious.

"Do you know what they said about me, Harry?" Riddle murmured, head tilting slightly. "When I presented... The darkest, most unsettling aura that any of the professors at Hogwarts had ever seen... Ollivander was right about me, I was destined for greatness... But not you."

He laughed, a breathy sound. Harry swore he saw a tinge of pink on his cheeks and in his lips. "No, you will die here, now, long before you ever have a chance to present. Your story ends with me, just as it was meant to be..."

He reached with one, semi-translucent hand as though to brush the hair from Harry's forehead. "Die for me, Harry," he breathed. Harry's heart pounded faster, his vision darkening—he tried to reach for the basilisk's fang to end this, just as he had in reality, but could not move. Riddle's gaze was as petrifying as the beast's he'd just slain.

Harry expected Riddle's ghostly hand to pass right through him. It didn't. He traced Harry's scar with one finger before cupping his face, laughing softly. "Ah, beautiful," he said, and Harry knew his smile and corporeality could only mean one thing—Ginny was dead. He had failed, he had let everyone down...

Riddle's smile was soul-gripping.

"Die for me."

He was leaning closer, Harry could feel the heat of his words on his face...

"Die for me, Harry."

It was a gentle coaxing, Riddle's sensuous request for his life...

"Die for *me*..."

A Sporadic Rut

Harry awoke with a start.

He sat bolt upright, his heart hammering and palms sweating. He ran a shaky hand through his hair and took a deep breath.

It was just... that dream had felt so *real*.

Was it real?

Harry had dreamt of Voldemort before, that was true enough—he'd envisioned the Dark Lord in an old mansion alongside Wormtail and his massive snake before he had regained his body...

Harry shook his head, telling himself that he needed to get a grip. Of course it wasn't real, how could it have been? It was nothing but a nightmare as a result of his time in the Chamber of Secrets, brought on by seeing Ginny earlier that day or something...

Still.

Harry shuddered, trying not to linger on just how... *disturbing* it had been. Tom Riddle, leaning over his immobilized body and—and almost *seducing* him into death, murmuring words like a murderer's sweet nothings...

Harry's stomach dropped when he remembered that they were supposed to be writing down their dreams for Divination. There was simply no way he was going to allow Trelawney to interpret *that* nightmare in his dream diary.

Grimacing, Harry got out of bed and prepared to face another long day.

The High Inquisitor.

Percy had mentioned in his horrible letter the night before that there would be *exciting* news in the *Prophet* that morning, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione did not need to comb through the paper to find what it was he'd meant. The front-page headline, which was written in bold, capital letters, read 'MINISTRY SEEKS EDUCATIONAL REFORM. DOLORES UMBRIDGE APPOINTED FIRST EVER "HIGH INQUISITOR".

“What does *that* mean?” Harry asked, dropping his quill. He had just been in the middle of scribbling down a fake dream about swimming with mermaids when the owl delivering Hermione’s paper had swooped in. “The High Inquisitor?”

Hermione read the article aloud. To say it was upsetting news would have been a vast understatement.

Dolores Umbridge now had the power to pass ‘educational decrees’ as she saw fit, and would be inspecting the other instructors as they taught their classes.

Harry and Ron experienced their first inspection that very afternoon. Umbridge had followed Trelawney around her smoky classroom as she questioned students about their dream diaries, and when forced to make an impromptu prediction, informed the High Inquisitor herself that she was in grave peril. Umbridge had not found her dramatic theatrics impressive, making a note on her clipboard and sighing.

Harry might have felt bad for Trelawney had she not immediately swooped down on Harry and Ron afterwards. The Divination Professor had concluded that each and every one of Harry’s made-up dreams—even the ones as inconsequential as him eating porridge—foretold of his early and tragic death as a puer. Harry’s empathy had quickly dissipated after that.

To make another bad day even worse, Harry had let his temper get the better of him again. In Umbridge’s class that evening, he had made the comment that he agreed whole-heartedly with her declaration that Quirrell had been a decent Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor—his only caveat being that he had Lord Voldemort sticking out of the back of his head.

He’d earned another week’s worth of detentions.

“You really need to learn to control yourself around her,” Hermione murmured once the class had ended and they were far down the hall. “You can’t just say things like that—”

“I know, I *know*!” Harry shouted. “I don’t need *you* to yell at me too, Hermione. I’m already bound to get my head ripped off by Angelina for missing more quidditch practices...”

Ron made a wordless sound of agreement. Hermione frowned but did not chastise him again. They walked in silence until they arrived at the portrait of the fat lady, where Hermione said, “*Mimulus*

Mimbletonia".

The painting swung open, and the sound of high-pitched giggles assaulted their ears.

"Ugh, what's all that about?" Ron muttered as the source of the commotion became clear—a group of what looked to be third or fourth-year girls were huddled in the corner, gathered around one with a magazine in her hands. Hermione's eyes narrowed on it at once, looking cynical.

"Keep reading, keep reading!" one of the surrounding girls prompted eagerly.

The girl with the magazine cleared her throat and began to read out loud. "I swear to you, dear readers, if such a thing were possible, I think I would have become pregnant by his stare alone. There's nothing like an omega making eye contact with an attractive alpha for the first time, I don't think I can describe it properly... But I'll sure as hell try." The girl paused as her audience giggled, but then quickly carried on. "It was like being struck by lightning, it was spine-tingling, it was *electric*. If I hadn't taken my suppressing elixir, I'm sure the look in his eyes would have triggered an instant heat on my part. I could tell he sensed it, too; our magic just *called* to each other, a magnetic pull so strong that it was a blessing we were out in public, really, or I'm sure he would have taken me right then and there. We were *meant*, we both knew it at once. I've come across many alpha males in my time—I hate to sound so immodest, but I've been pursued by a great deal of them—but none of their magic entranced me like his did. I felt trapped under his gaze, my knees literally went weak, my breath caught in—"

"All right, that's just about enough of that!"

The group of girls all jumped when Hermione snapped at them; they had been so engrossed in the story that none of them noticed the prefect hovering there. "Give it," she said, holding her hand out expectantly.

"What? Why?" said the girl with the issue of what Harry could now see was the *Witch Weekly* in her hands. "This isn't a banned item, I can have it—"

"I don't care what it is, you're causing a disruption in the common room. Hand it over or it's a detention."

The girl and her friends glowered. She begrudgingly gave Hermione the magazine, who nodded curtly and said, “Thank you.”

She rejoined Ron and Harry, and the three of them went to claim their favorite cushy armchairs in the corner of the common room. The girls who had been reading the article stalked away, casting Hermione angry looks before they climbed through the portrait hole and left.

“These really are terrible,” Hermione said, flipping through the issue of *Witch Weekly* she had just confiscated to the story the girls had been reading. A moving portrait of an attractive woman was on the left side, and next to that was a title which read, ‘*Confessions of an Omega Witch*’.

“How so?” Harry asked. He wasn’t really that interested in *Witch Weekly* articles, but he was keen to keep Hermione’s focus off the fact that he had lost his temper with Umbridge again.

“Because they perpetuate horrible stereotypes and idealize omega and alpha relationships,” she muttered. “Fetishizes them, too... It’s awful.”

“*Fetishizes* them?” Ron’s expression became instantly troubled. Harry was certain he would not have reacted in such a manner if his own sister had not presented as an omega. “What do you mean, *fetishizes* them?”

“These stories, people just eat them up,” Hermione said, sounding disgusted. “And it’s not the alphas and omegas, either. It’s mostly beta women who like to read this rubbish. They don’t live it, so they don’t have to deal with the reality. They can just get lost temporarily in the fantasy world of whatever the omega author decides to write and ignore the rest. These articles get as close to plotless smut as they can while still being publishable on a popular platform.”

Harry’s brows raised. He might have become *slightly* more interested now. “Yeah?” he said, eyeing the article with feigned nonchalance.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, clearly not fooled. “Yes, and it’s terrible. These stories are extremely damaging to the people who read them. They reinforce this notion that omegas are little more than sex objects whose entire existence hinges on being dominated by a powerful, charming alpha male.”

“So why do they write them, then!?” Ron snatched the magazine out of Hermione’s hands. “Why would omega witches—like this *Amelia Wright*—why would they write *smutty* articles, if it’s damaging to

them?"

Hermione sighed heavily. "I imagine that it's because it's one of the few jobs that isn't difficult for omegas to acquire. There's a demand for stories like that, and only omega witches can write them legitimately."

Harry and Ron both looked at her, surprised at how swiftly she had gone from irate to forlorn. "I've been thinking about this a lot actually... ever since Ginny presented," she admitted. "Life isn't easy for omegas. I feel guilty, too, because I remember being slightly disappointed when I presented as a beta... But I went from being disappointed to relieved rather quickly after I met formally with Professor McGonagall."

Harry leaned forward, listening attentively. He had forgotten that Hermione must have met with McGonagall after she'd presented in their fourth year, and that Ron, too, had needed to schedule a private meeting with her. It was required that all students meet with their Heads of House once they'd gone through the change.

"She explained it in a much more realistic way than I think she ever would have outside of her office, it being just the two of us," Hermione elaborated. She lowered her voice so that no one else would be able to hear them, though the common room was mostly empty. "Many omegas have a really challenging time after they leave Hogwarts. The ones who are born into rich families are fortunate, but that's certainly not everyone. If they want any sort of normalcy in their lives, omegas need to take suppressing elixirs every month, but they're expensive. So, in order to afford them, they need good-paying, full time jobs, ones with healthcare coverage—but those good-paying jobs take years of study after they graduate from Hogwarts, making that option almost non-existent. Which is really depressing, obviously, for a lot of reasons. Most omegas would make brilliant Healers..."

"But they would still be students, wouldn't they?" Harry pointed out. "If they go on to study to become Healers or whatever, they're still taking classes elsewhere, right? So they should still be able to get suppressing elixirs, shouldn't they?"

Hermione's expression darkened. "They should, but no, they don't. Hogwarts students have suppressing elixirs provided for them because Dumbledore fought to make it that way, but all those specialty schools, where students can continue with their studies to become Healers or Aurors or whatever else? They're all tied to the Ministry of

Magic in a way that Hogwarts isn't... At least, not at the moment..."

Her voice trailed off ominously. She didn't need to say it for Harry to understand—with Umbridge having just been appointed as the new High Inquisitor, the Ministry of Magic was becoming *much* more involved with Hogwarts.

"Why doesn't the Ministry provide elixirs for them, though?" said Ron, incredulous. "They should! Everyone should want omegas to be on suppressants, shouldn't they? It'd be chaos otherwise! Those stupid alpha politicians wouldn't be able to get anything done if there were omegas in heat around!"

"Those stupid alpha politicians *are* the reason why," Hermione said with deepest disdain. "They're the ones in charge, so they've set everything up to work in their favor. They make it almost impossible for omegas to get decent jobs with healthcare that covers the cost of the suppressing elixir. Consequently, omegas nearly all marry someone who does have a high paying job so that they're covered. It's not really talked about much, but omegas usually marry really, really young. They all say it's because they just found the right alpha so soon—and that may be true on some level, since omegas are always fought over so much and they basically have their choice of alphas—but that's one of the reasons why, it has to be. To have access to *Femina Reprimunt*. It's horrendous, all of it. The entire system is set up so that the wealthy alpha males of the world get the omegas. It's no coincidence that the alphas who typically end up with betas are the ones without much gold to their names."

Harry let out a low whistle. He tried to imagine McGonagall discussing all this with Hermione in the privacy of her office, and wondered if this was the kind of talking to *he* was going to get after he presented. He looked to Ron questionably.

"She didn't tell me all this," he said at once. "I met with her at the beginning of the year, and we didn't talk about any of this!"

Hermione raised a brow at him. "Did you ask?"

"About omega magic and politics? Er—no, I didn't. It was hardly a conversation at all, actually. I was only in her office for a minute."

"Of course she didn't tell you all this, then. Why would she talk about the complications of alphas and omegas when you're a beta?"

Hermione said. "She only told me because I asked her about a thousand questions, and she was kind enough to answer. I really do

feel grateful to be a beta now, too. You're lucky, Harry; if you do present as an alpha, it doesn't sound like it will be so terrible. The first few years are dramatic, but the sporadic ruts stop after that. Heats *never* go away. Unless they're pregnant, of course. Being an omega sounds dreadful, honestly..."

"What do the omegas who *can't* afford the suppressant do?" Ron looked truly worried as he asked. "The ones who don't just run off and marry some rich alpha."

"The only thing they can do," Hermione responded forebodingly. "*Quarantine.*"

"*Quarantine?*" Harry and Ron repeated as one.

"Yes. Heats are nothing like the warm, fuzzy feeling that witches like Amelia Wright would have you believe when writing for *Witch Weekly*," Hermione said scathingly, motioning towards the magazine which Ron still held. "They're dreadful. Perilous fevers and tremors, their magic going wild to attract alphas... McGonagall said they're described as being physically as painful as giving birth. Only they're *worse*, because the whole time omegas are in that agony, they're basically delusional with... with desire for an alpha."

Harry and Ron shared an uncomfortable look. Hermione blushed only slightly before carrying on. "They can't do anything. Being in heats puts omegas completely out of commission. Omegas who can't get their hands on suppressing elixirs have to lock themselves up, basically, and just wait it out. Or they have other people lock them up, I should say. An omega in heat would never just stay put on their own... Gods, I can only imagine what that would be like. How terrifying, to need to be *quarantined* while suffering so dreadfully. To know that every month you'll lose your sense of self completely..."

"Sounds kind of like being a werewolf without the wolfsbane potion," Harry murmured.

"There *have* been comparisons made between lycanthropy and alpha omega magical energies, interestingly," Hermione said thoughtfully. "I read that the illness becomes amplified in witches and wizards who are alphas and omegas, oddly enough, something about the way their magic reacts... But yes, omegas in heat without the suppressant lock themselves up, much like Professor Lupin did in the Shrieking Shack when he was younger. Though I don't imagine that omegas in heat are anywhere near as violent as *werewolves*, they're probably just in a

great deal of pain and high discomfort...”

“Oh, just in a great deal of pain and high discomfort! That’s all! No big deal!” Ron threw the magazine on the floor where it slid under the table in front of them. A few students from the other side of the common room looked around in surprise; Ron lowered his voice when he spoke next. “So the options are either find a way to pay for crazy expensive potions or suffer alone for *days*?”

“Or copulate with an alpha,” Hermione said flatly.

Ron’s face drained of color. He looked at Harry in a conflicted yet accusatory manner. “What?” Harry balked. “I didn’t make up the—the *rules* of magical dynamics! I agree with you, I think it’s ridiculous that omegas don’t have suppressants provided, too!”

“It is appalling,” said Hermione. “There are a lot of things in Wizarding Society that are just totally barbaric. The way they treat house-elves, the way they treat omegas... You know, maybe we should start something. Get all the students to sign a petition for omegas to have better access to suppressants after they leave Hogwarts... Maybe I could go around and get people to sign that, and talk about S.P.E.W., as well!”

Hermione brightened at the thought, but Ron immediately shook his head. “You can’t do that,” he said gravely.

“Why not?”

Ron took a deep breath, looking like he was choosing his next words very carefully. “Hermione, I know that you champion house-elves, and I agree that they should be treated better and all that, but... But I’m just saying, if *I* were an omega girl—and thank *Merlin* I’m not—and I heard you were going around and trying to get support for omegas in the same manner that you were trying to raise awareness for *house-elves*, well... I’d be a tad bit offended.”

Hermione’s enthusiasm wilted. “Oh,” she said. “Oh... I... Yes, you’re right. You’re absolutely right.”

Ron’s brows rose high on his head. “Am I?” he asked in disbelief. “*I’m* right about something?”

“Yes, that would be very tactless. I... need to think more about this. Maybe...” Hermione paused, then abruptly stood. “I’m going to the library.”

And with that brief announcement, she grabbed her bag and left. Harry and Ron watched her go with befuddled looks on their faces.

“I’m kind of glad she did that this time, actually,” Ron said. “I thought for a moment that she might be feeling ill when she said I was right. But no, she’s fine. That was a classic Hermione Granger move right there.”

“Stopping mid-sentence to go the library?” Harry said, smirking. “Yeah. Classic Hermione.”

Later, before they left to go find her again before dinner, Harry quickly fished the issue of *Witch Weekly* out from under the table and discreetly tucked it away in his bag.

Hermione did not bring up the topic of omega rights nor house-elf awareness again as the week progressed, but several more deplorable lessons with Umbridge had her thinking of something else.

Teaching.

Him, *Harry*, teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts.

He’d thought that she was joking when she first brought it up, but no. She and Ron agreed that it was great idea, and even though Harry had lost his temper when they’d begun listing off every impressive thing he’d ever done—most of which had nothing to do with skill and everything to do with luck—he had eventually come around to the idea again days later. Teaching Ron and Hermione defensive magic didn’t sound like such a bad thing.

But then Hermione had nervously suggested that Harry allow anyone who want to learn to join them, and Harry’s apprehension once more soared. He did not think anyone would want to take defensive lessons from someone who was not only being made out to be a nutter in the *Daily Prophet*, but a *puer*.

A *puer* who was, incidentally, assumed to soon present as an alpha... the likes of which did not usually perform well in defensive magic.

“Professor McGonagall said that’s only a tendency. It’s not true that every alpha is bad at defensive or restorative magic, just as it’s not true that all omegas are bad at hexes,” Hermione had said. “Future alpha or not, there’s no point in denying it, Harry: You’re excellent at Defense Against the Dark Arts. You’re the top of our class in the

subject, even better than me. You've performed spells that most fully-trained, presented adults can't manage. You can produce a patronus, you were able to completely throw off the Imperious curse last year—the only one in our class who could! You're good."

And there was really no denying that, once she had put it in such a blatant light. Still, Harry doubted that anyone other than Hermione and Ron would want to take lessons from him.

He was very wrong.

Harry was astounded at how many people had showed up at the Hog's Head that Saturday afternoon. Over twenty people from every house besides Slytherin had come to meet him, Hermione, and Ron on their first Hogsmeade weekend, anxious to hear what Harry had to say.

The meeting had gone better than Harry could have ever imagined. Not only did all the people who showed up *not* think he was a nutter, they truly thought him impressive. They'd listed off his accomplishments from years past in a way that did not make him angry, as it had when Ron and Hermione had first done so, but... proud. And confident. And more certain than ever that leading a secret operation to learn defensive magic right under Umbridge's nose was *exactly* what he wanted to do.

The only real issue they had left to solve was where to meet. No one had been able to come up with a place where they could secretly practice jinxes and counter-jinxes without being caught, though they all vowed to mull it over until one of them came up with something.

Everyone had then signed a piece of parchment which Hermione had brought with them to solidify their first group meeting. Even Cho Chang, whom Harry still feared would despise him after he had emerged from the Third Task when Cedric had not, had praised him, and was one of the first to sign.

"It's kind of ridiculous, really," Ron had commented after the last of the other students had left, leaving Harry, Hermione, and Ron alone in the Hog's Head. Cho had lingered at the table as long as possible, but her friend, who had clearly only come to accompany her, had clicked her tongue impatiently, forcing Cho to leave with her. She'd waved at Harry and smiled before departing. "You're not even presented yet, and already the omegas can't stop ogling you..."

Harry's face had instantly flushed. "Y-yeah?" he'd said, feeling extremely uncomfortable about this.

“Yeah, it’s obnoxious. Chang and my sister both...”

“That’s not true, Ginny wasn’t *ogling* Harry,” Hermione had interrupted. “Though I’m honestly surprised she showed, I thought for certain that her new omega friends would demand she spend the day with them... I bet she lied and said she was spending all day with Michael Corner. Or did you not notice the way they came in together? They’ve been going steady for a few weeks now.”

Michael Corner was a Ravenclaw boy in their own year. He was also an alpha.

Ron had *not* reacted to the news well.

Despite that unexpected bit of drama, Harry felt happier than he had all year by the end of the meeting. It was a pleasant warmth that stayed with him all weekend, right up until Monday morning, even though the day was to be filled with all his least favorite classes.

Harry and Ron awoke early to find a most unwelcome sign posted on the notice board of the common room.

———— BY ORDER OF ————

The High Inquisitor of Hogwarts

All Student Organizations, Societies, Teams, Groups, and Clubs are henceforth disbanded. An Organization, Society, Team, Group, or Club is hereby defined as a regular meeting of three or more students.

Permission to re-form may be sought from the High Inquisitor (Professor Umbridge). No Student Organization, Society, Team, Group, or Club may exist without the knowledge and approval of the High Inquisitor.

Any student found to have formed, or to belong to, an Organization, Society, Team, Group, or Club that has not been approved by the High Inquisitor will be expelled. The above is in accordance with Educational Decree Number Twenty-four.

It was signed by Dolores Umbridge.

The happiness that had filled Harry since Saturday quickly vanished, replaced by horrid rage. “She knows,” he said. “She must know, there’s no way this can be a coincidence...”

"She can't," Ron argued.

"Course she can, any one of those people at the Hog's Head could have run off and told her."

"I'll bet it was that Michael Corner," Ron instantly snapped. Harry doubted that it was Ginny's new boyfriend, but he didn't argue. "I wonder if Hermione knows yet... We should go and tell her."

He was on the sixth stair when it happened. A high screech sounded, and the stairs melted together, forming a smooth, stone slide. Ron attempted to remain balanced, his arms held out comically wide on either side of himself and spinning like windmills, but soon he fell and slid back down to the common room where he landed at Harry's feet.

"I don't think boys are allowed in the girls' dorms," Harry concluded, smiling and trying not to laugh.

Two fourth-year girls came zooming down the slide. "Oooh, who tried to get upstairs?" they giggled happily, leaping to their feet and staring at Harry and Ron.

"Me," Ron muttered. "I didn't realize that would happen. It's not fair!" he added to Harry, as the girls headed off for the portrait hole, still giggling madly. "Hermione's allowed in our dormitory, how come we're not allowed—?"

"Well, it's an old-fashioned rule," said Hermione, who had just slid neatly onto a rug in front of them and was now getting to her feet, "but it says in *Hogwarts: A History* that the founders thought boys were less trustworthy than girls. Though the stairs wouldn't have done that if Harry had tried. The curse is only activated if it's a male who's presented. If it's a beta it just turns into a slide; but if it's an *alpha* who tries to go up..."

"What?" Harry asked sharply when Hermione's voice trailed off. She was smirking in a way Harry did not at all like. "What would it have done if an alpha had tried to get into the girls' dorms?"

"A hex shoots up from the stones, knocking anyone with an alpha magical signature completely unconscious... *then* it turns into a slide," she said wryly.

Ron looked at the stairs with a slightly less affronted expression. He now appeared almost approving. "Guess it's a good thing you didn't go first, eh?" he said, glancing at Harry.

“Weren’t you listening to what I just said? Harry would have been fine if he’d tried it just now, he’s still unpresented—anyway, why were you trying to get in there?”

“To see you—come look at this!” Ron dragged her over to the notice board, where her expression became stony.

“Someone must have blabbed to her!” Ron said angrily.

“They can’t have done,” Hermione murmured.

“You’re so naive,” said Ron, “you think just because you’re all honorable and trustworthy —” “No, they can’t have done because I put a jinx on that piece of parchment we all signed,” said Hermione grimly. “Believe me, if anyone’s run off and told Umbridge, we’ll know exactly who they are and they will really regret it.”

“What’ll happen to them?” Ron asked eagerly.

“Well, put it this way,” Hermione said. “It’ll make Eloise Midgen’s acne look like a couple of cute freckles. Come on, let’s get down to breakfast and see what the others think... I wonder whether this has been put up in all the Houses?”

It was apparent right away that every House had the same decree posted in their common rooms. There was a frazzled energy in the Great Hall, and the moment Harry, Ron, and Hermione appeared, those who had met them in Hog’s Head all began to make their way over to them.

Hermione quickly motioned for them to turn away, for a number of students from different houses all convening in the middle of breakfast would have looked highly suspicious. They were still going to form a defense group, of course, and they said as much to Fred, George, and Ginny—but they couldn’t have everyone gathering right in front of the staff table, where Umbridge was tucking into her breakfast and looking smug.

The full weight of what Educational Decree Number Twenty-Four meant did not settle in until a few moments later. It referred to teams as well. Angelina was nearly in tears when she relayed this information to Ron and Harry, begging Harry to please, please not lose his temper with Umbridge again, for if he did, it could mean the end of quidditch for Gryffindor House. Harry adamantly swore that he would behave himself.

The day was already extremely nerve-wracking, and they hadn't even gone to their first class yet.

The drama only continued to escalate. History of Magic, usually such a dull period, was jarred out of its monotony by the unexpected arrival of Hedwig.

Harry's snowy owl had begun tapping on the window, and when Harry stealthily moved to let her in (Binns did not notice, nor did he so much as pause in his lecturing), found that she was injured. Her wing was bent at a funny angle and she was hooting feebly. In a blunt but somehow effective move, Harry managed to hide her behind his back and declared that he was sick. Binns called him Perkins and told him to go to the hospital wing. Harry grabbed his bag and left.

His first choice to have someone care for Hedwig would have been Hagrid, naturally, but seeing as Hagrid was still gone, Harry instead sought out Professor Grubbly-Plank in hopes that she would help.

He was fortunate to find her in the staffroom, and even more fortunate that she quickly agreed to set Hedwig right. Harry was less fortunate in that Professor McGonagall was there, eyeing him suspiciously when he said that Hedwig had traveled from London... which she must have known meant Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place.

However, if it hadn't been for McGonagall, Harry would have forgotten his letter which was still tied to Hedwig's leg. She handed it to him with a brief and ominous reminder that channels in and out of Hogwarts were more than likely being *watched*.

Before he could respond, the bell which signaled the end of classes chimed, and Harry was soon swept up in the crowd of students. Gripping the scroll tightly in one hand, he waited until he found Hermione and Ron at the end of the hall, then ripped it open as he made his way over to them. Written on the parchment was a short message in Sirius's handwriting.

Today, same time, same place.

"Is Hedwig okay?" asked Hermione anxiously the moment he was within earshot.

"Where did you take her?" asked Ron.

"To Grubbly-Plank," said Harry. "And I met McGonagall... Listen..."

Harry told them about Professor McGonagall's warning. To his surprise, neither of them looked shocked; on the contrary, they exchanged significant looks.

"What?" said Harry, looking from Ron to Hermione and back again.

"Well, I was just saying to Ron... what if someone had tried to intercept Hedwig? I mean, she's never been hurt on a flight before, has she?"

"Who's the letter from anyway?" asked Ron, taking the note from Harry.

"Snuffles," Harry said quietly.

"Same time, same place'? Does he mean the fire in the common room?"

"Obviously," said Hermione. She looked uneasy. "I just hope nobody else has read this..."

"But it was still sealed and everything," Harry said, trying to convince himself as much as her. "And nobody would understand what it meant if they didn't know where we'd spoken to him before, would they?"

"I don't know," said Hermione anxiously, hitching her bag back over her shoulder as the bell rang again. "It wouldn't be exactly difficult to reseal the scroll by magic... And if anyone's watching the Floo Network... but I don't really see how we can warn him not to come without that being intercepted too!"

They trudged down the stone steps to the dungeons for Potions, all three of them lost in thought, but as they reached the bottom of the stairs they were recalled to themselves by the voice of Draco Malfoy. He was standing just outside Snape's classroom door, waving around an official-looking piece of parchment and talking much louder than was necessary so that they could hear every word.

"Yeah, Umbridge gave the Slytherin Quidditch team permission to continue playing straightaway, I went to ask her first thing this morning. Well, it was pretty much automatic, I mean, she knows my father really well, he's always popping in and out of the Ministry... It'll be interesting to see whether Gryffindor are allowed to keep playing, won't it?"

"Don't say anything," Hermione whispered imploringly to Harry and

Ron, who were both watching Malfoy, faces set and fists clenched. "It's what he wants..."

"Arrogant alpha arse," Ron hissed back, never taking his eyes off Draco.

"I mean," Malfoy went on, raising his voice a little more, his eyes glittering malevolently in Harry and Ron's direction, "if it's a question of influence with the Ministry, I don't think they've got much chance... From what my father says, they've been looking for an excuse to sack Arthur Weasley for years... And as for Potter, well. My father says it's only a matter of time before the Ministry has him carted off to St. Mungo's. Apparently, they've got a special ward for people whose brains have been addled by magic."

Malfoy made a grotesque face, his mouth sagging open and his eyes rolling. Crabbe and Goyle gave their usual grunts of laughter, and Pansy Parkinson shrieked gleefully—

Something hard collided with Harry's shoulder, knocking him sideways. A moment later he realized that Neville had just charged past him, heading straight for Malfoy.

"Neville, no!"

Harry dove forward, trying valiantly to hold Neville back, but it was impossible—a jolt of magic coursed through Harry like an electric shock when he tried, and he fell backward onto the floor, his ears ringing.

Neville did not seem to notice nor care.

He rushed at Malfoy with his fists raised. There was a split second where Draco merely looked surprised.

Chaos erupted.

Malfoy's face swiftly contorted into a furious glower, the likes of which Harry had never seen there before, his gray eyes gleaming and fixated singularly on Neville. Crabbe and Goyle, who had been standing on either side of him and who usually flexed their muscles defensively when anyone threatened Draco, hastily withdrew.

Everyone did.

All the Gryffindors and Slytherins who had been lingering outside of

the Potions classroom immediately scrambled away, and Harry even heard someone scream. Neville looked absolutely murderous as he ran at Malfoy, whose pointed features were equally sinister.

Neville threw a punch at the same moment that Draco withdrew his wand, barely dodging the fist that was aimed at his head. Malfoy snarled in an inhuman way, and a hex that Harry did not recognize flew from the tip of his wand at the sound. It narrowly missed—Neville ducked at precisely the right moment, his face red, fists still raised, his expression deadly as a growling sound that was even more inhuman than Malfoy's escaped from deep in his throat—

The two went flying apart from one another. Draco was flung against a wall by some invisible force, his arms stuck down on either side and glowering ferociously as he was pinned to the wall; Neville went flying in the other direction and fell to the ground near where Harry was—

"I'll kill you!" It did not sound like Neville's voice at all. Harry was struck dumb as he stared at him; never in his life could he have envisioned Neville looking and sounding so vicious. *"I'll—"*

Another spell hit Neville in the back. His furious face went oddly slack for a moment, and then he slumped forward, looking dazed but not unconscious. Harry shifted so that he was further away and turned to see the source of the silent spells.

Snape had his wand raised and no expression on his sallow features. He did not say anything as Draco thrashed against the magic holding in him in place, nor did he acknowledge any of his fifth-year students who were all watching with fright in their faces. Snape pointed his wand at the door to his classroom, which promptly swung open. He then flicked his wrist once more, and a moment later a corked, glass bottle full of liquid came soaring into his other hand.

Harry recognized the elixir. He had taken it himself the past summer, though he hadn't need it. It was the *Masculum Reprimunt*.

Snape uncorked it and knelt at Neville's side, who was still flushed and breathing heavily. Harry watched in absolute astonishment, for it appeared that *Snape* was treating *Neville Longbottom*—the student he detested nearly as much as *Harry*—with something that almost resembled kindness. He rolled Neville to his side and propped his head up.

Neville must have been truly out of it, for he did not seem bothered at

all by being touched by his least favorite professor. “Drink,” Snape said quietly, holding the bottle to his lips. Neville did. Snape waited for him to take three full swallows of the elixir before seeming satisfied.

“P-Professor?” Hermione squeaked. Her eyes were wide with fear and concern. “I-is Neville going to be—”

“He will be fine,” Snape snapped, rising fluidly to his feet. He left Neville on the floor and recorked what was left of the elixir. “Mr. Longbottom has just gone through a very powerful and sporadic first rut.”

Everyone stared, thunderstruck. Harry could not believe it—it was almost unheard of for alphas to go through sporadic first ruts like that. For one, alpha males typically had plenty of notice before they officially went through the change, as they had the development of the *bulbus glandis* as a forewarning. But even without that, they supposedly went through days of being noticeably irritable to everyone they talked to—and Neville had been perfectly cheery when he’d been at the meeting on Saturday...

That, and, well... he was *Neville Longbottom*. No one expected Neville to present as an alpha male, least of all Neville himself.

“B-but he d-didn’t seem to be symptomatic at all—”

Hermione must have been thinking along the same lines. Snape cut her off with an icy tone. “It is rare, but the magic of alpha males can sometimes be brought on early—and violently—if the unrepresented male in question was already nearing magical maturity... though that is only usually the case because they are either around another rutting male, an omega in heat... or there has been a very strong emotional trigger.”

He glared accusingly at Harry. “What *did* you do, Potter?”

“Me!” Harry shouted. It was like Snape had chosen to assume it was his fault simply because he was the only other person on the floor. “It wasn’t *me*,” he said as he pushed himself to his feet, “It was *Malfoy*—”

“*I did nothing!*”

Accusing Malfoy of being the cause was evidently a grave mistake. Draco, who was still pinned against the wall, yelled so ferociously that everyone’s focus snapped to him, withering at the sound. His face

twisted further in fury; an animalistic, savage quality to it, and his wand, still in his hand which was stuck against the wall, let out a stream of vivid, scarlet sparks.

All the students cowered and backed away further. Harry could not even properly feel magic yet, but even *he* cringed instinctually. Harry had never thought Malfoy scary before—horrible, yes, obnoxious, certainly—but never scary.

He was positively frightening now.

“Let me go—*let me go!*”

Snape was the only one who seemed completely unaffected by Draco’s towering rage. He strode over to his struggling student and lazily flicked his wand, lifting the curse. Draco threw his arms down, his chest heaving and his glower flickering from Harry to Neville and back again.

“Put your wand away and drink this, Draco, before you make a fool of yourself,” Snape instructed quietly, offering him the same bottle from which Neville had just drank.

Draco glared at it. “I already took mine—”

“Your magic is reacting anyway. It happens when you are younger and have less control. *Take it.*”

“I don’t—”

“Twenty points from Slytherin.”

Even as high on alpha magic as he was, this statement effectively wiped the glower from Malfoy’s face. He stared at Snape like he had just spoken another language, or sprouted an extra head, perhaps.

Harry was equally stunned. *Never* had he heard of Snape taking points from his own house... and certainly not from his favored student, Draco Malfoy.

“...What?” Draco said, his voice much quieter and darker.

“Twenty points from Slytherin for not immediately following instructions. Continue to hesitate and you’ll also earn a week’s worth of detentions.”

Draco’s jaw fell open. If the situation hadn’t been so tense, Harry was

sure he would have found this delightful.

For a suspended moment, it looked like Malfoy might do something very stupid—his grip on his wand tightened and his jaw visibly tensed—but then he shoved his wand in his pocket forcefully and snatched the bottle from Snape's hand, draining what was left of it.

Once it was empty, he held the empty bottle so tightly his knuckles were white, and it was only then that Harry noticed his hand was shaking. He fixed Snape with a most contemptuous glare. "Happy, sir?" he sneered. Harry was astounded. He had never heard Malfoy speak rudely to the Potions Master before.

There was a very short but high-strung moment of silence. "...You are dismissed from my class for the evening, Mr. Malfoy," Snape responded coldly. "Excuse yourself to your common room until you can control your temper."

Draco looked so mutinous at this he was nearly frightening again. Rather than try and argue, however, he took a step backwards, away from the classroom. "Fine!" he snarled. He stalked off, glaring down at Neville's dazed form on the floor like he was strongly considering kicking him. Instead, he swerved sharply so that he could knock Harry as hard as he could in the shoulder, muttering '*puer*' in a scathing voice under his breath as he did.

Malfoy marched down the hall. He was several paces away before he chucked the empty bottle with as much force as he could muster, where it shattered spectacularly against the wall. Several girls screamed.

Snape's face became rigid, but he did not call after him. He waited until Draco had disappeared behind a corner, then pointed his wand at the fragments of glass which were scattered all over the stones. "*Reparo*," he said quietly, and it became a whole bottle once more.

Neville let out a pained groan from the floor. He had now rolled to his side and begun to shake, his eyes half-closed and panting. "Miss Granger, Mister Weasley. As the prefects for your House, I'm giving you the responsibility to safely see Mister Longbottom to the hospital wing. His current rut is suppressed for the moment, but he'll need more elixir soon. I suppose it was fortunate that this fiasco happened outside of *my* classroom..."

Harry could deeply appreciate the truth of this statement. He tried to imagine what could have happened if Neville had heard Malfoy make

that unwitting, insensitive comment in the Great Hall. Neville's sporadic rut had nearly triggered Malfoy into one, too. If that had happened in a space where there were over thirty other alpha males nearby...

It could have been a *disaster*.

Ron and Hermione each gave Harry a fleeting, apologetic look before nodding. They gently pulled Neville to his feet, who whimpered as though he was in great pain from even that slight motion. He walked with great difficulty despite having two people helping him along. His moans of pain could be heard all the way down the hall.

The strained moment of silence which followed was broken by a high-pitched whimper. Harry turned to see the girls who must have screamed before—Fay Dunbar and Daphne Greengrass were clinging to each other in the corner. Omegas, Harry recalled suddenly. It was difficult to tell if they were afraid or not; their pupils were blown and they were quivering, but they seemed oddly expressionless, almost spellbound. It was an incredibly rare sight. Harry had never seen a Gryffindor and Slytherin *hugging* before.

Snape pocketed his wand and approached them, assessing them carefully for a moment before concluding that they were stable. "You will be fine," he said in an uncharacteristically soothing voice. "They are gone. I have Calming Draughts that you can take in the classroom."

He then motioned for the two girls to step inside first. Fay and Daphne seemed to come back to themselves; they glanced at each other and then immediately recoiled, like neither of them could believe they had just touched the other. They were still trembling as they went into the classroom with a much more comfortable space between them. Snape quickly followed.

"Well?" he drawled when the rest of the class remained standing in the hall, frozen in place. "Get in here. Class started five minutes ago."

Snapped out of their state of shock, everyone hurried to do what they were told. They all exchanged looks of astonishment but said nothing. Snape did not tolerate speaking.

Still, Harry knew they were all thinking the exact same thing that he was with just as much disbelief.

Neville Longbottom—*Neville Longbottom*—was an *alpha*.

Which meant that he, Harry... was the only puer in their year left.

The Monster in the Forest

Neville's dramatic presentation was the main topic of conversation that evening in the Gryffindor common room.

It was all Harry had been able to think about during what had turned out to be yet *another* dreadful Potions class (Snape had been particularly cruel to Harry, like he still believed Neville's presentation was somehow his fault), *another* dreadful Divination lesson (Trelawney was on probation; she had, evidently, not predicted this), and another dreadful Defense Against the Dark Arts class (*‘There shall be no need to talk.’*).

Everyone was speculating on the details, but Harry alone knew why Malfoy's insensitive comment had cause Neville to explode with such rage. He had not even told Ron and Hermione about Neville's parents being in St. Mungo's; Neville himself was not aware that Harry knew.

The entire interaction between Neville and Malfoy plagued him. Not even the distressing news that the Gryffindor Quidditch team had not yet been given permission to reform, nor the fact that they would be speaking with Sirius again that evening, was enough to distract Harry from what had happened earlier that day.

Neville was an alpha.

Harry was a lone puer in a class full of magically mature students.

He tried valiantly not to dwell on this fact as he, Hermione, and Ron sat in the corner of the common room working on homework—which they now had time to do, seeing as they no longer had Quidditch practice. It was very difficult not to think about though, as students from other years continually kept coming over to ask Ron and Hermione, who had taken Neville to the hospital wing, for details.

“Is it true he punched Draco Malfoy in the face?”

“What did that git say to make Neville snap like that?”

“I heard he shattered a glass bottle over Snape's head!”

“Did he really shove you to the ground too, Potter?”

“Of course not!” Hermione shouted for perhaps the tenth time. Harry was grateful. Though he was sure the story of how he, Harry the puer,

had attempted and failed to hold back a presenting alpha would be common knowledge throughout the school by tomorrow morning, that didn't mean he wanted to hear the rumors himself. The offending fourth-year and his friends scurried away at Hermione's raised voice. "And the next person who bothers us gets detention!"

"Thanks," Harry murmured after they'd gone.

"It's nothing," said Hermione. "Honestly, all anyone cares about is this magical maturity nonsense..."

"Fred and George said it tends to calm down a bit once everyone has presented... the excitement factor wearing off and all that." They all glanced to the opposite side of the common room where Fred and George now stood—the twins seemed to be capitalizing on the energy in the room and were trying to direct the excitement towards themselves. Evidently, they had finally perfected one of their Skiving Snackboxes.

"Is that right," said Harry. He scoffed. "Well, guess it's just on me, then... Though knowing my luck, it'll just, I dunno. Never happen."

"That's statistically impossible," Hermione said at once. Harry and Ron raised their brows at her. "Well it is. It was discussed in the third chapter of *The Basic Principles of Magical Dynamics*. You know, the book that was required reading in our first year?"

She rolled her eyes when Harry and Ron shared an apprehensive look. "You didn't read it, did you?"

"Of course we did," said Ron, trying to look offended. "It's just—that was years ago, that—"

"Magical maturation is guaranteed to happen to any human or part-human that has magic. If you have human magical blood in your veins, you will present as either an alpha, beta, or omega. And you obviously have magic, Harry, so unless you're secretly a full-blooded goblin with an impeccable glamour, you're going to present before you turn seventeen... Some people are just later than others is all. And we happened to have a class of many early bloomers."

Ron's lips twitched. "That would be an interesting plot twist in the tale of your life, Harry," he said. "The Boy Who Lived discovered to be a goblin!"

"Shite," Harry said. "You've found me out. I've been undercover this

entire time, infiltrating Hogwarts under the guise of Harry Potter so I could learn about wandlore. Curse you, Granger!”

Harry pointed his quill at her. Across the room, George began puking violently into a bucket to gasps and shrieks while Fred pointed and Lee cheered.

Hermione cast them a disgruntled look before responding. “I was kidding when I said that. Glamours wouldn’t cut it—they’d only disguise you physically—and Polyjuice Potion only works on people. That’s the only known way to imitate another person’s magical signature, and even then, it’s just a ruse. Harry, you have *puer* magic, not *goblin* magic. Couldn’t be more different.”

Harry’s smile wilted.

Of *course* he knew that. Harry knew that all magical creatures had their own aura about them, he knew that each one was different and unique according to their species—Professor Grubbly-Plank and Hagrid always lectured extensively on each one’s unique properties (‘Unicorns, nice airy feel in their magic, gets lighter as they age... Adults won’t willingly let presented alphas anywhere near them, so stay back, boys... They prefer puers and have a peculiar attraction towards omegas... Look, that one is going straight for Miss Dunbar...’, ‘Bowtruckles, sort of a prickly magic, meant to ward off magically mature witches and wizards, but often just makes them easier to find...’). The main difference between wizards and creatures was that only humans went through the dramatic presentations that plagued those who became alphas and omegas. Creatures matured differently, the progression varying depending on what they were... but only humans and part-humans had three distinguishing magical categories.

Yes, Harry knew the interesting variations existed, but he didn’t know what they were like, not really, because he could not yet sense any of them.

Harry frowned and turned his attention back to his essay. It was essentially impossible with all the commotion happening in the room, and Hermione was not helping matters. The cheers and sounds of vomit hitting the bottom of Fred and George’s bucket were punctuated by loud and disapproving sniffs that Harry found, if anything, even more distracting.

“Just go and stop them, then!” he snapped, crossing out the wrong weight of powdered griffin claw for the fourth time.

"I can't, they're not technically doing anything wrong," Hermione muttered. "They're quite within their rights to eat the foul things themselves, and I can't find a rule that says the other idiots aren't entitled to buy them, not unless they're proven to be dangerous in some way, and it doesn't look as though they are..."

It was well past midnight before the common room finally cleared, leaving Harry, Ron, and Hermione alone by the fireplace. At long last, Sirius's head appeared in the fire, and he was instantly beaming.

It seemed all of Sirius's resentment from the end of their last discussion had dissipated. As it transpired, he knew all about their plans to start a defensive group right under Umbridge's nose—Mundungus was the witch under the veil—and the notion that they were plotting such a rebellious act clearly couldn't have made him prouder. Harry was filled with a rush of pride and relief—perhaps he was like his father, after all.

They were just discussing possible places where their group could meet up when it happened.

Sirius's voice abruptly cut off. The fire flickered. And then, just a second after Sirius disappeared, a hand appeared in the fire, grasping through the flames as though trying to catch hold of something: a short, stubby hand covered in gaudy, old-fashioned rings...

The three of them ran for it. At the bottom of the staircase to the boys' dorms Harry looked back; Umbridge's hand was still sweeping through the flames, as though she had known that Sirius Black's hair had been hovering there just seconds before, and she was determined to seize it.

The following day proved to be just as dramatic as the previous one.

Harry, Hermione, and Ron had come to the undeniable—and very unwelcome—conclusion that Umbridge was reading Harry's mail. She had been the one to attack Hedwig, and there was no way they could risk communicating with Sirius again.

News of Neville's presentation had flooded the entire school, and Neville himself was still in the hospital wing. Evidently, his sporadic rut had been powerful enough that Madam Pomfrey had needed to give him an extra-large dosing of repressant, and the side effects of the potion were enough that he was bedridden.

"I suppose that makes sense," Hermione had said as they left charms class the day after Harry had voiced his confusion about this. Male students took the *Masculum Reprimunt* regularly in the first few years after presenting, and they weren't bedridden because of it.

"How d'you figure?" Harry asked.

"Well, it is a magical repressant. The reason it works is because it suppresses magic—all of it. It's true that it's formulated to repress alpha magic specifically, and Dumbledore made it even better at that when he made adjustments to the original potion years ago, but it's still represses magical energy in general. If only a small dose is taken, I suppose the side effects aren't so bad—just a slight weakening of one's magical energy—but taking a little bit preemptively is very different than needing to take a whole lot when your magic is already in a rut..."

"You know, that actually does makes sense," said Ron as they headed towards the Great Hall for lunch. "Bill always complained about needing to take it when he was younger; he said it made him feel sluggish and off. I guess that's why. He was glad when his magic settled and he didn't have to take it anymore."

"Guess that explains why Malfoy was being such a prat about being told to take more of it after Neville presented," Harry said, recalling just how adamantly Draco had initially tried to turn it down.

"Yes, well... in Neville's situation, I imagine it took quite a toll on his body as well..."

Hermione's voice trailed off and a moment later her cheeks turned pink. She looked like she was already regretting that she'd voiced that thought out loud when Ron said, "His body?"

"Er—yes, well," Hermione said, her eyes now focused in front of her rather than looking at Ron or Harry when she spoke. "You know, most alpha males... Their, ah, extra anatomy usually takes days to develop. Sometimes upwards of a week before they present. Which is good, seeing as they have a good deal of warning before anything drastic happens... But with Neville... Well, that process which is usually so gradual just happened all at once. I imagine that was... unpleasant."

Harry's stomach twisted as he and Ron shared a highly uncomfortable look. To have the *bulbus glandis* develop in a moment...

Harry knew the two instances were not the same, but he couldn't help

but think of how terrible it had been to have the bones in one arm regrown overnight in his second year. He had a feeling that calling Neville's situation 'unpleasant' was putting it very mildly.

"That sounds bloody terrible," Ron said, and Harry nodded in agreement. He did not want that to happen to him.

When they made it to the Great Hall it was to find Malfoy and his usual gang of Slytherins hovering near the entryway. When he spotted Harry, Ron, and Hermione he grinned wickedly.

"You know, my father says that it's a *true* sign of magical prowess," Malfoy said loudly, his eyes gleaming malevolently as they flickered between Ron and Hermione and then settled on Harry. "Says that only a really powerful alpha male's magic could possibly trigger a *puer* straight into a rut like that. It's only ever happened a handful of times.... Guess my magical aura is just *that* strong."

It was obvious by his tone that Malfoy thought it not embarrassing, but deeply impressive that he had caused Neville to present, and he wanted to make sure the entire school was aware of his opinion. Malfoy smirked. Harry did not like the way his lips curled in the slightest. "Perhaps it will even happen again."

From that moment on it was perfectly clear: Draco Malfoy wanted to be the cause of Harry Potter's sporadic presentation, too.

Everywhere Harry turned, it seemed that Malfoy was just *there*, hovering somewhere nearby to make a snide comment or rude remark. He had ample opportunity to do so—once Gryffindor had been given permission to reform their Quidditch team, the usual pre-match cruelty provided many reasons to hassle and intimidate the opposing team. The Slytherins were especially harsh towards Ron, the newest and most nervous member, but Harry suspected that Malfoy's viciousness had another purpose. Every time he would snarl something terrible at Ron, it was Harry he would leer at, just waiting for him to snap in some overly protective manner. It was clear he thought that torturing Ron would be a more effective way to cause Harry to erupt in a flash of alpha rage.

He wasn't wrong. Each time Malfoy and his obnoxious friends made some comment about Ron's keeping skills, Harry felt his blood boil and his hands instinctively twitching with the urge to reach for his wand—but Hermione always said something under her breath, warning he and Ron both not to give Malfoy the satisfaction that he

had gotten to them.

Besides, they had other things to focus on. They had finally found a place to have their Defense meetings, and the idea had come from none other than Dobby.

The house-elf had appeared in the Gryffindor common room (he was wearing what must have been every wool hat Hermione had ever made) to return Hedwig to him, and it was he who had been able to fulfill what Harry thought was an impossible request: to find a place where over twenty people could gather to practice hexes, jinxes, and counter-curses and not get caught.

The Come and Go Room, the Room of Requirement. Harry had heard Dumbledore mention it once before, so when Dobby described it to him, Harry knew it was real. Dobby told him precisely where it was and how to get in, and he, Ron, and Hermione made sure the instructions, as well as a time and date to meet there, had been passed along to everyone who had attended their first meeting at the Hog's Head... with the exception of Neville, of course, who was still in the hospital wing.

At half-past seven that evening, they left the Gryffindor common room, Harry clutching a certain piece of aged parchment in his hand. Fifth-years could be out in the corridors until nine o'clock, but all three of them kept looking around nervously as they made their way up to the seventh floor.

"Hold it," said Harry. He pulled out the Marauders' Map and, tapping his wand to it, said "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good." A map of Hogwarts appeared upon the blank surface of the parchment. Tiny black moving dots labeled with names showed where various people were.

"Filch is on the second floor," Harry said, scanning the map, "and Mrs. Norris is on the fourth."

"And Umbridge?"

"In her office. Okay, let's go."

They hurried along the corridor to the place Dobby had described to him. "Okay," said Harry quietly, "Dobby said to walk past this bit of wall three times, concentrating hard on what we need."

They did so, turning sharply at the window just beyond the blank

stretch of wall, then at the man-size vase on its other side. Ron had screwed up his eyes in concentration, Hermione was whispering something under her breath, Harry's fists were clenched as he stared ahead of him.

We need somewhere to learn to fight... he thought. A place to practice... somewhere they can't find us...

"Harry," said Hermione sharply, and Harry turned.

A door had appeared in the wall. Harry reached out, grabbed the handle, pulled it open, and led the way into a spacious room lit with flickering torches. The walls were lined with bookcases, and instead of chairs there were large silk cushions on the floor. A set of shelves at the far end of the room carried a range of instruments such as Sneakoscopes, Secrecy Sensors, and a large, cracked Foe-Glass that Harry was sure had hung in the fake Moody's office the previous year.

It was everything they could possibly need to practice. Harry grinned appreciatively at the impressive room, his heart swelling with admiration for Dobby for having found such a space. Hermione immediately became immersed in a Defensive text, and Ron was prodding the cushions and examining the tools provided for them.

There was a gentle knock on the door a few minutes later. Harry looked around; Ginny, Lavender, Parvati, Dean, and, surprisingly, Neville had arrived.

"We ran into Neville in the hall on the way here," Ginny said brightly before Harry could ask. "So we brought him along!"

Harry gave him a wary look. Neville appeared a bit paler than usual.

"Are you feeling all right?" Hermione asked, setting the book she had been reading aside.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he said. He looked apologetically to Harry. "Listen, Harry—I'm really sorry. I don't remember what happened, really, and I didn't mean to—"

"It's fine," Harry said curtly. He did not want Neville to bring up the fact that he had tossed Harry to the ground with the force of his magic. "It wasn't your fault. I'm just sorry you didn't get more swings in at Malfoy, honestly."

Neville grinned sheepishly. "My gran is beside herself," he said. "Sent

me more sweets than I'll ever be able to eat after she got a letter from McGonagall telling her what happened. I thought she was going to be mad when she heard I tried to attack someone, but no. I don't think she's ever been prouder in her life... She hates the Malfoy family. That, and no one expected me to be an alpha, even though..."

Neville's voice trailed off into silence. He then shrugged and said, "She's just really pleased. Anyway. What's this room you've found? It's incredible!"

Harry began to explain, but before he could finish a few more people arrived, and then a few more, and soon it became obvious that Harry should just wait until everyone was present before speaking. Soon the room was filled with students from every house except Slytherin. Cho Chang gave him a flirtatious smile from beside her disgruntled-looking friend. Harry became painfully aware of the fact that he was the only puer in the room and tried very much to ignore this fact.

The meeting went shockingly well. Harry was officially elected leader, Ginny had come up with their brilliant name, and they all practiced disarming spells until everyone had managed it successfully, even Neville, who was clearly still not quite recovered from his presentation but was adamant about learning defensive magic, no matter what the cost.

Dumbledore's Army had been born.

The Slytherins' atrocious behavior towards Ron came to a head on the day of their first match.

Pins of crowns adorned the robes of every Slytherin supporter, and the song 'Weasley is our King' was sung with gusto from the far end of the stands when Ron failed to stop the quaffle the first time around. The terrible song only flustered him further, and it quickly became Harry's job to catch the snitch and win as quickly as possible.

Fortunately, he had.

In an impressive dive and breathless moment, Harry had snatched the snitch right from under Malfoy's grasp; he held it up high to the deafening roar of approval from the Gryffindor supporters. It didn't matter that Ron had let those goals in, they had won the match...

But then a bludger had hit Harry in the back of the head, and everything fell apart in a terrible downwards spiral.

Malfoy, continuing in his pursuit of angering Harry as much as possible, as well as being fueled by the rage of his own failure, was more vicious than ever in his spiteful words. Harry hardly remembered what exactly he had said anymore. All he knew was that Draco Malfoy had insulted the Weasley's parents and his own mother, and in the next moment he was no longer holding George back but joining him in sprinting across the pitch at the sneering alpha.

It could have gone very badly very quickly, but it was at that moment that Madam Hooch finally noticed the drama that was happening behind her—she'd been distracted yelling at Goyle for his illegal bludger attack on Harry. It must have been Malfoy's magic that had alerted her; when George and Harry charged, Malfoy did not look afraid in the slightest. His face had taken on that twisted, savage look again, only this time it was somewhat condescending, almost like he was amused at the prospect of a beta and a puer thinking to strike him.

Madam Hooch intervened just before Harry or George could land a blow. A spell blasted both of them backwards, and Malfoy stood there, leering, untouched and looking unbothered by the fact that they had both been determined to punch him within an inch of his life. Harry wondered what would have happened if they had gotten closer. Would Malfoy had reacted towards them in the same manner he had towards Neville? Would his magic have contorted into something vicious and terrible with not an alpha, but a beta and a puer attacking him?

They would never find out, but the fact that Harry and George had not managed to cause Malfoy any physical pain was only a small part of the tragedy that was the match.

Harry and George had been sent to McGonagall right away, the snitch in Harry's hand struggling for freedom. McGonagall, incensed, had been in the process of giving them detentions, but then none other than Umbridge had intervened with a brand new Educational Decree—they were now up to Twenty-Five.

Banned.

Harry, George, *and* Fred were banned from playing Quidditch ever again... all because they had *tried* to attack Malfoy.

Harry was left knowing only one thing with certainty after that. He either was not an alpha, or was simply nowhere near presenting after

all. If he had been, he surely would have by now. Either while trying to attack Malfoy, or, more likely, right then and there in that office—and probably would have ended up in Azkaban too, because Harry most certainly would have tried to murder the beta Umbridge in a flash of sporadic, violent alpha magic. Harry liked to think that George would have helped him, and that McGonagall might have at least had the decency to not intervene.

“Banned,” said Angelina in a hollow voice, late that evening in the common room. “Banned. No Seeker and no Beaters... What on earth are we going to do?”

It did not feel as though they had won the match at all. Everywhere Harry looked there were melancholy and angry faces. The team themselves were slumped around the fire, all apart from Ron, who no one had seen since the end of the match.

“It’s just so unfair,” said Alicia numbly. “I mean, what about Crabbe and that Bludger he hit after the whistle had been blown? That was way worse than a few people trying to hit Malfoy—Harry could have been seriously injured! Has she banned *him*?”

“No,” said Ginny despondently. “He just got lines, I heard Montague laughing about it at dinner.”

“And banning Fred when he didn’t even run at him!” Alicia snarled.

“It’s not my fault I didn’t,” said Fred scathingly. “I would’ve tried to pound the little arrogant, alpha scumbag to a pulp if you three hadn’t been holding me back.”

Harry stared miserably at the dark window. It was snowing. The Snitch he had caught earlier was now zooming around and around the common room; people were watching its progress as though hypnotized, and Crookshanks kept trying to catch it.

“I’m going to bed,” said Angelina, getting slowly to her feet. “Maybe this will all turn out to have been a bad dream... Maybe I’ll wake up tomorrow and find we haven’t played yet...”

She was soon followed by Alicia and Katie. Fred and George sloped off to bed some time later, glowering at everyone they passed, and Ginny went not long afterwards. Only Harry and Hermione were left beside the fire.

“Have you seen Ron?” Hermione asked. Harry shook his head.

“I think he’s avoiding us,” said Hermione. “Where do you think he—?”

But at that precise moment, there was a creaking sound behind them and Ron came clambering through the portrait hole. He was very pale and there was snow in his hair. When he saw Harry and Hermione he froze.

“Where have you been?” said Hermione, jumping to her feet.

“Walking,” Ron mumbled. He was still wearing his Quidditch gear.

“You look frozen,” said Hermione. “Come and sit down!”

Ron walked to the fireside and sank into the chair farthest from them, staring at his muddy shoes. The stolen Snitch zoomed around their heads.

“I’m sorry,” Ron mumbled, avoiding looking at them.

“What for?” Harry asked.

“For thinking I can play Quidditch,” Ron answered miserably. “I’m going to resign first thing tomorrow.”

“If you resign,” Harry muttered irritably, “there’ll only be three players left on the team.” When Ron looked confused, he said, “I’ve been given a lifetime ban. So’ve Fred and George.”

“What?” Ron yelled.

Hermione told him the full story; Harry could not bear to tell it again. When she was finished, Ron looked more anguished than ever. “This is all my fault—”

“You didn’t make me and George try to attack Malfoy,” Harry snapped.

“—if I wasn’t so lousy at Quidditch —”

“— it’s got nothing to do with that —”

“—it was that song that wound me up—”

“—it would’ve wound anyone up—”

Hermione got up and walked to the window, away from the argument, and watched the snow swirling down against the pane.

“Look, drop it, will you!” Harry shouted. “It’s bad enough without you blaming yourself for everything!”

Ron fell silent for a time. After a while he said, “This is the worst I’ve ever felt in my life.”

“Join the club,” Harry muttered.

“Well,” said Hermione, her voice suddenly strangely high. “I can think of one thing that might cheer you both up.”

“Oh yeah?” said Harry skeptically.

“Yeah,” said Hermione. She turned away from the dark, snow-speckled window, a smile spreading across her face. “Hagrid’s back.”

They were outside of his hut and knocking on the door within a quarter hour. A dog instantly started barking from inside.

“Hagrid!” Harry called. “It’s us!”

“Shoulda known!”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione all beamed at one another under the Invisibility Cloak. His voice was gruff, but it was clear by his tone that Hagrid was pleased. “Been home about’ three seconds... Move, Fang...”

He opened the door a moment later, and Hermione screamed.

“Keep it down!” Hagrid said hurriedly. He was looking wildly over their heads, which was a true testament to how amazing Harry’s Invisibility Cloak was; it not only hid one physically, but concealed magical energies as well. Hagrid could not sense them at all while they stood on his doorstep. “Under the cloak, are yeh? Well get in, get in—yer not supposed to be out this late—”

“I’m sorry!” Hermione gasped as the three squeezed into his hut. Hagrid closed the door behind them and Harry pulled the cloak off, stowing it in his pocket. “It’s just—oh, Hagrid!”

“It’s nothin’!” Hagrid said, waving one giant hand flippantly. “Want a cuppa?”

It was certainly not nothing; Hagrid looked as though he'd been attacked. There were cuts all over his hands and bruises on his face, and his left eye had been reduced to a puffy slit. When he moved to place a kettle on the fire, he walked with a limp.

"What happened?" Harry asked at once. He shoved Fang away, who was trying to enthusiastically lick his face.

"I said it's nothin'!" he repeated.

"Come off it," said Ron, "you're in a right state!"

"I'm tellin' yeh, I'm fine," said Hagrid, straightening up and turning to beam at them, but wincing. "Blimey, it's good ter see you three again... But I thought..."

His beady eyes lingered on Harry, a curious look on his face. Harry was effectively, if momentarily, distracted by how beaten Hagrid looked. "No, still haven't presented," he said tersely. "You're not alone in being surprised. You and everyone else in the world thought I would have by now."

To his surprise, Hagrid merely shrugged, wincing again as he did. "Nothin' to worry about, Harry," he said. "Didn't present myself until I was sixteen. Glad of it too, mind you. Most magical creatures are far kinder an' more receptive ter puers than they are presented witches an' wizards... I was able ter earn their trust before I became a beta. Glad fer tha' too... They don't much care for alpha, most creatures, find them intimidating..."

"Hagrid, you've been attacked!" Ron interrupted.

"Fer the las' time, it's nothin'!" said Hagrid firmly.

"Would you say it was nothing if one of us turned up with a pound of mince instead of a face?" Ron demanded.

"You should go and see Madam Pomfrey, Hagrid," said Hermione anxiously. "Some of those cuts look nasty."

"I'm dealin' with it, all righ'?" Hagrid walked across to the enormous wooden table that stood in the middle of his cabin and twitched aside a tea towel that had been lying on it. Underneath was a raw, bloody, green-tinged steak—slightly larger than the average car tire.

"You're not going to eat that, are you, Hagrid?" said Ron, leaning in

for a closer look. "It looks poisonous."

"It's s'posed ter look like that, it's dragon meat," Hagrid said. "An' I didn' get it ter eat."

He picked up the steak and slapped it over the left side of his face. Greenish blood trickled down into his beard as he gave a soft moan of satisfaction. "Tha's better. It helps with the stingin', yeh know."

"So are you going to tell us what's happened to you?" Harry asked.

"Can', Harry. Top secret. More'n me job's worth ter tell yeh that."

"Did the giants beat you up, Hagrid?" asked Hermione quietly. Hagrid's fingers slipped on the dragon steak, and it slid squelchily onto his chest.

"Giants?" said Hagrid, catching the steak before it reached his belt and slapping it back over his face. "Who said anythin' abou' giants? Who yeh bin talkin' to? Who's told yeh what I've — who's said I've bin — eh?"

"We guessed," said Hermione apologetically.

"Oh, yeh did, did yeh?" said Hagrid, fixing her sternly with the eye that was not hidden by the steak.

"It was kind of . . . obvious," said Ron. Harry nodded.

Hagrid glared at them, then snorted, threw the steak onto the table again and strode back to the kettle, which was now whistling. "Never known kids like you three fer knowin' more'n yeh oughta," he muttered, splashing boiling water into three of his bucket-shaped mugs. "An' I'm not complimentin' yeh, neither. Nosy, some'd call it. Interferin'."

But his beard twitched.

"So you have been to look for giants?" said Harry, grinning as he sat down at the table. Hagrid set tea in front of each of them, sat down, picked up his steak again, and slapped it back over his face. "Yeah, all righ'," he grunted, "I have."

And so Hagrid told them the entire, long tale of his quest to try and win over the allegiance of the giants with Madame Maxine. For Harry's sake, he tried to explain just how menacing giants' magic was

– heavy and oppressive, he said, just like their appearances. It made them extremely difficult to take down in a battle. Ron had made the somewhat insensitive comment that he noticed Hagrid’s magic, while undoubtedly a beta’s, seemed a little heavier than anyone else’s he’d come across and asked if that was why. Hermione had shot him a pointed look.

“Course it is,” Hagrid had said, not looking offended at all. “Can’t complain about tha’, either. Made me and Olympe the perfect people for the job, even she is... well. We were much more easily accepted than an alpha wizard woulda been.”

But despite being half-giants, Hagrid and Olympe had not been as successful as they’d hoped they would be. Their interactions with the first Gurg—the leader of the giants—had been inspiring, but then that giant had been killed, and a far more ruthless one took its place... one that preferred the Death Eaters.

Voldemort had sent some of his beta followers to sway the giants as well, and Macnair had much better luck with the second Gurg than Hagrid and Olympe had.

Still, they were hopeful that they had made some progress with a few of them—the giants who hid away in caves on the outskirts of the mountainous area where the largest giants lived—so they did not think it a complete loss.

“But that still doesn’t explain how you got in this state,” Ron said when he had finished, gesturing towards his bruised and bloody face.

Hagrid opened his mouth, looking like he was just about to explain, when there was a sharp knock on the door. Hermione gasped and dropped her mug. All four of them turned and looked—the shadow of someone short and stout could be seen through the curtain.

“It’s her!” Harry whispered urgently. “Quick, Hagrid, hide our mugs!”

Hagrid quickly did so; Harry pulled out his cloak and he, Ron, and Hermione hid under it and backed away into a corner as far as they could go. They watched the interaction between the Hogwarts High Inquisitor and the newly returned Care of Magical Creatures with bated breath.

She knew.

Umbridge asked too many pinpointed questions, she made too many

frightening observations. She knew that Hagrid had been to the mountains, and she knew that he had been there on Dumbledore's orders. By the time she finally, finally left—informing Hagrid that she would be inspecting him soon, determined to weed out the unsatisfactory professors of Hogwarts—Harry had a terrible feeling in his gut.

"She's gone," Hagrid said, peering through the curtain a few moments after he'd closed the door behind her. "Blimey, inspectin' people, is she?"

"Yeah," said Harry, pulling the Cloak off. "She's a monster, Hagrid. Trelawney's on probation already..."

"Speaking of monsters," Hermione said lightly, "Um... what sort of thing are you planning to do with us in class, Hagrid?"

"Oh, don' you worry abou' that, I've got a great load o' lessons planned," said Hagrid enthusiastically, scooping up his dragon steak from the table and slapping it over his eye again. "I've bin keepin' a couple o' creatures saved fer yer O.W.L. year, you wait, they're somethin' really special."

"Erm... special in what way?" asked Hermione tentatively.

"I'm not sayin'," said Hagrid happily. "I don' want ter spoil the surprise. But we will be going in ter the forest, I'll tell yeh that! Don' look so scared Hermione, it'll be great!"

And no amount of warning on Hermione's part did anything to make him elaborate any further. Hagrid smiled with a steak balanced on his face and waved them off, telling them to go back to the castle and not to worry about him.

"I don't think you got through to him," Ron said, and Harry nodded.

"Then I'll just go back again tomorrow," Hermione said. They left no trace behind them as they went back to the castle, as she continually cast Obliteration Charms as they walked. "I don't care if I have to plan every lesson for him. I don't care if Umbridge sacks Trelawney, but she's not taking Hagrid!"

Harry wondered if it was simply stress that was the cause, but his dreams seemed to be becoming more and more vivid as time went on. It felt like the moment he closed his eyes that night, he was dropped

straight into another one, which was dark, visceral, and extremely lifelike.

The forest.

Maybe it was brought on by Hagrid's mentioning that they would be going into the Forbidden Forest soon, but that was where Harry found himself in this dream. It was night. The moon was swollen and full above him, occasionally eclipsed by a billowing cloud.

He was alone.

Harry was by himself, and he had no idea what he was doing in the Forbidden Forest in the dead of night. He turned, looking over both shoulders and trying to see if he recognized where he was. He didn't. Harry only knew that he could not be too deep in the woods, as the trees were not so close together that they blocked the sky. Hagrid's hut and the castle could not be too far off.

Harry began walking with caution. He felt oddly unafraid, considering that he knew how dangerous this forest could be at night. He didn't even think to reach for his wand. He trekked through the woods with a strange sense of calm.

It began to snow.

Just a few white flecks at first, and then a few more, and soon it was a heavy, thick snowfall that surrounded him. Harry folded his arms across his chest and kept walking. Snow landed in his hair and shoulders; it caught on the leaves and blanketed the forest ground. Harry left tracks behind him as he walked, but he did not bother to vanish them as Hermione had when they left Hagrid's hut earlier that day. He was focused solely on finding the edge of the forest...

Harry soon came across a clearing he had never seen before. It was a little meadow that was pristinely white, the fresh layer of snow yet untouched by any of the forest creatures. It seemed to glow under the full moon. Harry watched in a sort of numb, reverent awe as more snow fell, more whiteness joining the small clearing that seemed like something holy. All was silent and still.

Then he saw the unicorn.

A beautiful creature that was so bright and lovely, that the newly fallen snow looked gray in comparison. It appeared from between the trees and began walking straight towards Harry, its long horn shining

brilliantly in the moonlight, its black eyes wide and lustrous. Harry froze, unsure of what to do. He did not understand why it was approaching him. Should he be afraid? Should he run?

He did not have a chance to decide. Moments later and the unicorn was standing directly in front of him, nudging its nose against Harry's cheek. Snow fell from his hair onto the unicorn's long face, but the creature didn't seem to mind. Bewildered, as well as a bit giddy, Harry smiled and stroked its neck. The unicorn's fur was extremely soft and warm.

Then the dream turned swiftly into a nightmare.

The unicorn let out a shrill cry, and before Harry could comprehend why or how, he was shoved aside, some force he could not see pushing him backward. His back slammed into the tree nearest to him, and it was only by grabbing a branch that he was able to stay on his feet.

Harry stared in wide-eyed horror at what was unfolding before him.

The unicorn had been dragged across the field in a flash of movement, and its high-pitched cry had become weak, muted. It was on its side, twitching feebly, and there, in a black, billowing cloak, someone was looking over it, their hooded face against its neck—

No, Harry thought with horror, as he watched paralyzed with fear. Liquid silver was dripping down the unicorn's neck, staining its fur, and it eventually stopped making sounds altogether. Its black eyes were fixed on Harry as it was drained of its blood, so viciously, so quickly—black and pleading and wide.

"No!" Harry shouted, and the figure's neck snapped up in his direction.

Harry couldn't breathe.

It was not Quirrell who was under the dark hood in this nightmare, nor was it Voldemort as Harry had seen him in the graveyard.

It was Tom Riddle who looked up at him, his lips stained silver, his robes flecked with snowflakes like fluffy white feathers torn from an angel's wings. His eyes were the same black as the unicorn's, but they gleamed with something else entirely. When his gaze locked with Harry's, there was an undeniable *want* flickering there.

Harry couldn't even scream; he was so taken aback by the sight. Tom Riddle rose fluidly to his feet, leaving the unicorn lying there, weakened but not yet dead.

He advanced.

"No," Harry finally managed to gasp, his body springing back to life in a rush of adrenaline. He reached frantically for his wand, but there was nothing in his pocket, and when he looked back up to Riddle his horror escalated a thousand-fold.

Riddle was *holding his wand*. His smile was twisted. Unicorn blood made his whole mouth shine, coating his teeth and dripping down his chin.

Harry ran.

He turned and sprinted as quickly as he could, but he'd taken only two steps before a spell collided with his back. *Petrified*, he knew at once, for all his muscles locked up in a horrible way. He could not move. He fell to the ground with an expression of fear frozen on his face, landing on his side, the snow cushioning his fall. He was positioned at just the right angle so that he could see Riddle's boots as he slowly sauntered over to him, his black cloak billowing in the snowy breeze.

Harry's heart pounded against his rib cage. It seemed the only muscle in his body capable of movement.

"Harry, Harry, Harry..."

Riddle murmured his name, practically cooing at him as he approached. He knelt at Harry's side, the unicorn blood still staining his smile. He didn't move to wipe it away. "You can't run from me... I need *your* blood too..."

Harry tried desperately to move, to will his paralyzed form to break Riddle's spell, but he could not. Snow fell on his glasses, and soon Riddle was obscured by the huge flecks of white that landed on the glass. Harry might as well have been a sculpture of ice in this winter nightmare his mind had invented.

As if realizing that Harry could no longer properly see him, Riddle wiped the snow from Harry's lenses. "I want to be real, Harry," he said, and his low voice had gained a bit of an edge to it. "I want a real body... And I need *your* blood for that, don't I..."

His smile widened, warped and demonic. “You’ll die for me, won’t you, Harry...? Yes, you will. I’ll have you. Your death is *mine*.”

His eyes flashed a brilliant crimson. Harry’s mind was screaming but his lips would not part, his jaw would not move.

Riddle was leaning closer, eyes red and vivid—his skin was becoming whiter than the snow on his lashes, his face was becoming gaunter, less human—

“*Mine*,” he said again, and he was far too close—he was going to do to Harry what he had done to the unicorn, he was going to tear him open and drain him of everything he had; Riddle was going to steal his soul and his blood and his life and make himself into something better and stronger—he could feel the breath of his mouth against his neck—

Harry awoke with a jolt, his heart pounding as hard in reality as it had in his nightmare.

Better to be Beta

Hermione's attempts at warning Hagrid about Umbridge had been largely useless. She'd trekked down to his hut on Sunday—Ron and Harry had wanted to go but could not, unable to put off their mountain of homework any longer—and had returned two hours later, reporting bleak news. Hagrid was not heeding her advice; he did not yet understand the horror that was Dolores Umbridge. Harry almost envied his ignorance.

Hagrid's reappearance at the staff table at breakfast the next day was not met with enthusiasm by all. Some, like Fred, George, and Lee, were beyond delighted, and sprinted up the aisle between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables to welcome him back; others, like Parvati and Lavender, exchanged gloomy looks and shook their heads deplorably. Harry knew that most of the students preferred Professor Grubbly-Plank's lessons, and worst of all was that there was a very small, rational part of himself that completely understood why: Professor Grubbly-Plank's lessons did not regularly involve the risk that one or more students might end up in the hospital wing.

It was with great apprehension that Harry, Ron, and Hermione made their way down to Hagrid's on Tuesday, their scarves wrapped tightly around their necks and heads to stave off the cold. Harry was deeply concerned, not only for whatever it was that Hagrid planned on showing them today—something thrilling and dangerous, no doubt—but by how Malfoy and his gang of Slytherins would act if Umbridge was there to evaluate him. He was certain that Umbridge would be in attendance—there was no way that she would want to miss Hagrid's first lesson with the fifth years, who were preparing to take their O.W.L.'s.

Yet Harry's worries were for naught. The High Inquisitor was nowhere to be seen as they made their way down to where Hagrid waited for them by the edge of the forest. He was far from a welcoming sight; the bruises on his face which had been black and blue on Saturday were now a sickly green and yellow, and even more frightening was the fact that there seemed to be new ones wound on top of them. Harry was confused by this. What kind of magical creature had been attacking him that his injuries were not properly healing? Some of the cuts looked so fresh that they were still bleeding.

As though to complete this perfect picture of doom and gloom, Hagrid

had a dead carcass of half a cow slung over his shoulder. “We’re workin’ in here today!” Hagrid called as he motioned towards the dark forest behind him, his cheery voice at great odds with his ominous appearance. “Bit more sheltered! Anyway, they prefer the dark...”

“What prefers the dark?” Malfoy said it sharply under his breath, speaking to Crabbe and Goyle, but Harry heard him. “What did he say prefers the dark—did you hear?”

Harry smirked. *So much for all alphas being brave and reckless*, he thought in amusement. Evidently, that powerful brashness only surfaced when one was feeling threatened or in a mindless rut or something.

Harry chanced a quick glance at Malfoy, whose expression did, indeed, look nervous. He smirked. After the Quidditch match in which he, Fred, and George had been banned, anything that caused Malfoy discomfort was fine with him.

Feeling a bit more hopeful about how the lesson might go, Harry turned his attention back to Hagrid.

“Ready?” said Hagrid merrily, looking around at the entirety of the class once they had all gathered. “Right, well, I’ve bin savin’ a trip inter the forest fer yer fifth year. Thought we’d go an’ see these creatures in their natural habitat. Now, what we’re studyin’ today is pretty rare, I reckon I’m probably the on’y person in Britain who’s managed ter train ’em—”

“And you’re sure they’re trained, are you?” Malfoy interrupted. Harry nearly laughed; he was clearly trying very hard to sound merely drawling and condescending, but his voice was laced with obvious unease. “Only it wouldn’t be the first time you’d brought wild stuff to class, would it?”

The smirk quickly slid from Harry’s face. The other Slytherins were murmuring their agreement at Malfoy’s words, and a few of the Gryffindors looked as though they thought that Malfoy had made a fair point too. “‘Course they’re trained,” Hagrid said, scowling as he adjusted the cow carcass so that it settled more firmly over his shoulder.

“Then what happened to your face?” Malfoy demanded.

“Mind yer own business!” Hagrid shouted angrily. “Now if yer done askin’ yer stupid questions, follow me!”

He turned and strode straight into the forest. Nobody seemed keen on following him right away. Harry grimaced, thinking it a bit ironic that he, the sole puer of the group, was to be the first to venture past the treeline.

Trying not to think of the unsettling nightmare he'd had the night before—one of a snow-covered forest very much like this one—Harry set his jaw and walked. Hermione and Ron were at his side in an instant, and soon the rest of the class followed... if somewhat reluctantly.

They followed Hagrid in the woods for nearly ten minutes, during which time Harry's heart pounded nonstop in his ears. Every time they turned to veer this way or that, he thought they might come upon a sudden, mysterious clearing, one filled with a pristine layer of snow.

But they never did, and by the time Hagrid called for them to stop, they had arrived in a place where the trees were so close to one another that it was as dark as dusk, and there was no snow on the ground at all. Hagrid dumped his half a dead cow onto the ground with a grunt, took a step back, and turned to face his class. Most of his students were still creeping around the many trees, peering anxiously through them as though expecting something to lash out at them from between the branches at any moment.

"Gather roun', gather roun'," Hagrid called, smiling again. It was not as reassuring an expression as Harry was sure he meant to be—one of the cuts on his cheek had cracked open and begun to bleed again.

Hagrid didn't seem to notice. "Now, they'll be attracted by the smell o' the meat, but I'm goin' ter give 'em a call anyway, 'cause they'll like ter know it's me..."

Hagrid turned his head towards the sky, shook the hair from his bloodied and bruised face, and let out an odd, piercing cry rather like that of a monstrous bird. The sound echoed in the dark trees. No one laughed. Most of the class was too scared to do anything other than stand there, looking uneasy—even Malfoy and Zabini, who were usually wore such smug, arrogant expressions these days.

After a moment of silence, Hagrid gave another shrieking cry. A full, suspense-filled minute passed in which the entire class continued to look nervously over their shoulders, waiting anxiously for whatever it was that Hagrid was summoning.

A sudden ripple seemed to pass through the class, and Hagrid grinned

triumphantly. "They're close," he murmured.

"Oh, what is that?" Malfoy said, and he shuddered violently.

Harry might have smirked at this were it not for the fact that everyone else seemed to be reacting the same way. Hermione had wrapped her arms around her chest like she was cold, and Ron too had begun to shiver.

"Their magic," Hagrid said. His beady, black eyes were scanning the trees. "Yeh feel it? Cold, like a frost settling at night... they'll show themselves any minute, I reckon..."

Just as Harry had begun to glower, feeling frustrated that he was once again being left out, unable to sense magic properly, he saw it. A pair of bright, blank eyes were growing larger in the darkness between the trees, and for a split-second Harry thought *unicorn*—but no. A moment later, he could see a long, dragonish face, a slender neck, and the skeletal body of a great, black, winged horse emerging from the shadows. It looked about at the class with its shining eyes, its long, black tail swishing back and forth as though interested, then it lowered its reptilian head and began to tear into the dead cow with what transpired to be very pointed fangs.

Harry's frustration was washed away beneath a wave of relief. Finally, proof that he had not invented the creatures which pulled the carriages! He was not crazy after all, they were real! He looked eagerly to Ron, but Ron was staring in the wrong direction, looking anxious. Most of the rest of the class were wearing similar expressions, seeming as nervously expectant as Ron, looking anywhere but at the giant, black horse that was *right there*...

Everyone except Neville, Harry noticed, whose wide eyes were following the horse's swishing tail, and a stringy Slytherin boy he did not know the name of, who had a look of great distaste on his face as he watched the creature eat.

"Oh, an' here comes another one!" Hagrid said proudly. A second black horse appeared out of the dark between the trees, folded its wide, leather wings against its back, and lowered its head so that it too could gorge itself on the meat. "Now... put yer hands up, who can see 'em?"

Incredibly relieved to feel as though at least he was going to learn how and why there were sinister horses which only a few people could see, Harry raised his hand at once. He was of only three to do

so. For once Harry felt a bit superior—he might not have been able to truly sense the magic radiating off these creatures—and if the way his peers were reacting was anything to go off, he was glad that he could not—but he could *see* them. “Yeah, I knew you’d be able ter, Harry... An’ you too, Neville? An—”

“Excuse me,” Malfoy drawled, in his would-be unafraid, superior voice, “but what exactly is it we’re supposed to be seeing?”

In response, Hagrid pointed down at the cow carcass which was currently being shredded apart by two draconic horses. The entire class stared for a few seconds, aghast, and then the reactions were superfluous. Most people gasped and pointed; Parvati and Lavender gripped each other and squealed; Pansy Parkinson hid behind Malfoy like he might protect her, and Fae Dunbar—who was on the opposite side of the small clearing as Daphne Greengrass, Harry noted—actually screamed.

“Sh!” Hagrid warned, for the two horses had raised their heads to stare at her, their ears upturned. “They don’ like loud, sudden noises...”

But Harry could hardly blame them. He could only imagine how surreal and frightening it looked to watch a cow carcass being ripped apart and eaten by some invisible entity.

“What is it, what’s it doing?” Parvati demanded in a trembling voice, retreating behind Dean, who was trying far more valiantly than Malfoy to look strong and fearless. “What’s eating it?”

“Thestrals,” Hagrid answered proudly. Hermione gasped in recognition at Harry’s side. “Hogwarts has got a whole herd of ‘em in here. Now, who knows—?”

“But they’re really, really unlucky!” Parvati shouted shrilly. “They’re supposed to bring all sorts of bad luck! Professor Trelawney told me once that—”

“No, no, no,” Hagrid said, chuckling, “tha’s just superstition, that is, they aren’ unlucky! They’re dead clever, an’ useful! ‘Course, this lot don’ get a lot o’ work, it’s mainly jus’ pullin the school carriages unless Dumbledore’s takin’ a journey and don’ want ter apparate—an’ here’s another couple, look—”

Two more black horses come silently from the forest, one of them passing very close to Parvati, who shivered violently and clutched

Dean's arm. Dean instantly stood taller and pulled her closer, and even Harry could feel a sort of alpha dominance suddenly emitting from him. "Oh, I can feel its magic, it's really close, isn't it?" she whimpered.

"Don' worry, it won' hurt yeh," Hagrid said gently. "Righ', now, who can tell me why some o' you can see then an' some can't?"

Hermione instantly raised her hand. At Hagrid's nod, she said, "The only people who can see them are people who have seen death."

"Tha's right," said Hagrid. "Ten points ter Gryffindor. Now, thestrals. Brilliant creatures. Dead clever, like I said, and they have an amazin' sense of direction—"

"Hem, hem."

Harry's blood ran cold. He shared a quick and despairing look with Hermione and Ron.

Professor Umbridge had arrived.

Naturally, the lesson did not go well.

Harry tried not to reflect too deeply on Umbridge and her monstrosity of a regime on Hogwarts.

It was December, only one, glorious week until the break for the Christmas holiday, and there was no way that the High Inquisitor would have time to try and push through probation—or possibly a sacking—before then.

It was the first time since becoming a student that Harry found himself very glad that he could spend his holiday somewhere other than Hogwarts. Between his ban from Quidditch and worrying about Hagrid, Harry was feeling highly resentful towards the first place he considered home. The only thing he looked forward to at all were the DA meetings, and they would have to stop anyway, as nearly everyone who attended would be going home for the holidays. Hermione was going skiing with her parents—a notion which greatly amused Ron, who had never heard of such a thing—and Ron, after realizing he had never properly invited Harry, had informed Harry that he was, in fact, invited to spend Christmas at the Burrow. Harry's spirits had soared at the news, though it was tainted with a twinge of guilt. He would have very much liked to see Sirius, and he wondered whether Mrs. Weasley

could somehow be persuaded to invite him too. Harry doubted it, however—even if Dumbledore would allow Sirius to leave the Headquarter of the Order of the Phoenix, Harry did not think Mrs. Weasley would want him anyway—they were so often arguing.

Harry hated the idea of Sirius alone in Grimmauld Place for Christmas. His godfather had not contacted him once since their last conversation, and even though Harry knew it was unwise to try and reach him, he did not like to think of Sirius holed up in his parents' home, with no one but a hippogriff and Kreacher for company.

On the day of their last DA meeting before the holidays, Harry arrived in the Room of Requirement early—and he was very glad that he did. When the lights burst to life, they revealed decorations that Dobby must have made. Harry could tell at once that it was him, for alongside the inoffensive tinsel and mistletoe were a hundred golden baubles hanging from the ceiling, each bearing a picture of Harry's face, animate and smiling, beneath which was script that read, "HAVE A VERY HARRY CHRISTMAS!"

Internally mortified, and thinking that perhaps there was a god, after all, that he had come early, Harry had just removed the last of them before the first person arrived. "Hello," said Luna Lovegood, looking dreamy as she usually did as her wide, blue eyes scanned what remained of the decorations. "These are lovely. Did you put them up?"

"No," said Harry hastily, "it was Dobby the house-elf."

"Mistletoe," said Luna, pointing at a large clump of white berries placed almost over Harry's head. Harry, perhaps, rudely, but unthinking, jumped away.

"Smart," said Luna very seriously. "It's often infested with nargles. Horrible creatures."

Harry was saved the necessity of asking what nargles were by the arrival of Angeline, Katie Bell, and Alicia. "Well," Alicia began crisply, not bothering with the politeness of greetings, "we've replaced you."

"Replaced me?" Harry said blankly.

"You, Fred, and George," Angeline went on impatiently. "We've got another seeker!"

"Who?"

“Ginny Weasley,” she said. Harry gaped at her.

“Yeah, I know,” said Angelina. “But she’s pretty good, actually. Has that sort of grace and fluidity when she flies that’s supposedly so common of omegas. She’s got nothing on *you*, of course,” she added, bitterly, “but as we can’t *have* you...”

Harry bit back the angry retort he longed to snarl at her. “And what about the beaters?” he asked instead.

“Andrew Kirke and Jack Sloper. Neither are brilliant, but compared to the rest that turned up...”

The arrival of Hermione, Ron, and Neville, brought that depressing discussion to an end, and soon enough the room was full of people. Ginny was the last to arrive, and as she hurried into the room she looked windswept and disheveled.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said, casting Harry an apologetic grin. “Those omega girls, they’re not so easy to shake off, sometimes, *especially* Godiva...”

Ron made an annoyed, scoffing sound. Ginny ignored him and joined everyone else, who were already gathered around Harry, and Harry felt a strange sensation of something that he could only describe as jealously as he looked at her.

Ginny was *replacing* him as Seeker...

“Right,” he said authoritatively, shoving that thought aside. “I figured that we would just go over the things that we’ve learned so far, seeing as this is the last meeting before the holidays, and it wouldn’t make sense to start something new... So, we’ll start with the Impediment jinx, practicing in pairs. Then we can grab cushions and try stunning and shielding charms again.”

The lesson went better than Harry might have imagined. He swelled with pride as he watched his students curse and hex one another, all with a proficiency he was certain they did not have before his lessons.

Neville in particular seemed dedicated to learning defensive magic. “Doesn’t matter that I’m an alpha,” he said with poorly concealed haughtiness. “I want to be great at protective spells, too.”

And he was; Harry would never deny it. Neville may have been an alpha, but he was more than keeping up with the betas in terms of

defensive magic, and surpassing them when it came to stunning. Shockingly, he was nearly on par with the omegas when it came to shielding charms, and which Ginny Weasley and Cho Chang excelled.

And *there* was an interesting student. Cho was constantly flashing Harry coy grins, batting her lashes, and Harry wasn't sure what to make of it. She made him think of Cedric. Didn't he, Harry, remind her of the same tragedy which bound them both? Why would she even want to look at him so bashfully?

"You're getting really good," Harry finally declared, beaming at them all. "When we get back from break, we can start some of the big stuff—maybe even Patronuses."

There was a ripple of excitement at this. Then the room began to clear, most people wishing Harry a Happy Christmas as they left in their usual groups of twos and threes.

For a moment Cho lingered—she looked between Marietta and Harry with an expression of great conflict on her face—but at Harry's indifferent smile she grinned back, and left with her friend. Harry wondered what that was all about as he straightened the cushions, Hermione and Ron both casting him shrewd, knowing looks which annoyed him greatly, but which he didn't ask about.

A moment later, and his thoughts were completely focused on the fact that he would be leaving Hogwarts soon. In a few weeks he would be going to Burrow, leaving his troubles—if only temporarily—behind.

Harry's dreams were beginning to feel so life-like that Harry could hardly tell the difference between them and reality.

The moment his head hit the pillow that night, Harry dreamt that he was something *other*.

His body was long, muscular, powerful... He was gliding along a cold, hard floor, and though he registered that the stones were frigid, this did not bother him... He was unaffected by the chill, his body superior to such trivial ailments...

He felt so unreal, and at the same time, he felt so *right*. Like he had never known that this, this coiling, powerful form, was what he was meant to be all along.

It was dark, but Harry could see the world shimmering around as

though through a kaleidoscopic lense: the objects surrounding him were outlined in strange, vibrant colors... He turned his head, wary... The corridor was seemingly empty at first glance, but no—Harry could feel the heat of someone near, could *smell* him... With a bit more focus, he became clear. The outline of a man sitting on the floor, blocking his way... Harry flicked his tongue into the air; he tasted the man's scent... He was alive, this beta human, but he was tired, perhaps asleep...

Harry longed to strike him, but no; he must master himself... There was much more important work to do, and his death would be unnecessary, quite unnecessary...

But then the man stirred. A long, silvery cloak slipped from his shoulders as he jumped to his feet, pulling out his wand from his belt. He had no choice: Harry struck, once, twice, three times, sinking his long fangs into his chest. He felt ribs crack in his jaw, could taste salty, warm blood in his mouth as it gushed into his mouth... The man screamed, then fell silent before he slumped against the floor... blood was pooling beneath him... Harry's scar hurt terribly, it felt like his forehead was going to split wide open...

"Harry! *Harry!*"

Harry's eyes flew open. He was shaking, his body ice-cold yet covered in sweat, his sheets twisted around him like a suffocating cocoon. His scar felt like someone had branded him there, a piercing, bright pain on his forehead.

"Harry!"

Ron was standing over him, looking deeply worried. The pain in Harry's scar was too great to handle: he rolled over and was violently ill over the side of the bed.

"I'm going to get help," said a firm voice from somewhere far, far away. The other figures at the foot of Harry's bed were murmuring. Harry ignored them, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, forcing himself to focus.

"Your dad," Harry choked out, needing Ron to understand *now*. "He's been attacked."

"What?"

"it was terrible, I was there, I saw it—there was blood everywhere—"

The pain in Harry's forehead was lessening somewhat; it became easier to think. "Harry, y-you were just asleep, having a nightmare," Ron said uneasily. "Neville went to go get help though, and—"

"I wasn't dreaming!" Harry roared. "I saw it Ron, I—I *did* it..."

Dean and Seamus exchanged dark and questionable looks. Harry didn't care; couldn't Ron see how important this was?

Harry tried once more to explain, as well as to get out of bed, but Ron wouldn't let him. Harry held his head in his hands, trembling, willing the pain in his scar to subside completely. Mr. Weasley's body on the floor, gushing blood, was imprinted viscerally in his mind... He—no, a snake, had done that...

"Here, Professor."

Neville came rushing into the dormitory room with Professor McGonagall behind him. When Harry explained to her in a hurry what he had seen—what he had *witnessed*—he was beyond relieved that she did not seem to think he was crazy.

In fact, she believed him. "Put on your dressing gown," she said curtly. "You too Weasley. We're going to go see the Headmaster."

Harry felt like he had aged ten years over the span of the next twenty-four hours.

The meeting with Dumbledore, in which Harry had felt the terrifyingly powerful urge to strike him in the second he'd held the Headmaster's gaze, just before the portkey swept them away. He and all the Weasley children leaving Hogwarts right under Umbridge's nose to go to Grimmauld Place, where they would be closer to St Mungo's. Mr. Weasley, resting in the hospital, bedridden but alive—and going to make a full recovery. Harry, Ron, Fred, George, and Ginny all going to see him the next day, accompanied by Order members... and overhearing the damning news that *Voldemort may be possessing him*.

Harry, realizing that *he* must have been the weapon that the Order had been talking about. *He* had been the snake. *He* had attacked Mr. Weasley.

He was a danger to them all.

Harry knew it deep in his heart; knew it because (though he would never admit this out loud to anyone) he had felt good in the body of that serpent. He had felt joyful as he attacked Mr. Weasley, he had *liked* the powerful feeling of his bones cracking in his mouth and blood flowing onto his mouth. He had felt *good* doing it. Right. *Whole*.

The truth of it frightened Harry more than words could possibly say. No, he could not stay at Grimmauld Place, not if Voldemort could possibly use him like that again.

And just as he had firmly made the decision to run, and had been set to leave the magical world behind forever—anything for the safety of his friends—Harry had been caught by none other than Phineas Black, the man in the portrait. He'd had a message from Dumbledore.

Stay where you are.

And so Harry had, despite how incensed the Headmaster's command and lack of all other information had made him.

But he was glad for it, in the end. Hermione had joined them the next day ("Dumbledore told me everything that happened, so I told my parents that anyone who is serious about their exams would be staying at the castle, so I should too, that way I could join you all for Christmas—truth is, skiing isn't really my *thing*...") and she, unlike everyone else, had no qualms at all about bursting into his room (where Harry had taken to hiding away from the rest of them, feeling unclean and unfit to be anywhere near anyone) and demanding that he come out and talk to them.

It was Ginny who had managed to cast his fears aside.

Harry had quite forgotten that Ginny had been possessed by Tom Riddle for months. He'd never felt so stupid and guilty, but at the same time—after apologizing for being such an idiot—couldn't have been happier. The way Ginny described being possessed was nothing like what he'd gone through. He remembered everything—vividly. And, as Hermione pointed out, he couldn't have possibly left Hogwarts to go turn into a snake and attack Mr. Weasley.

"One day, you shall read *Hogwarts, a History*," she had quipped, "and you shall finally learn that it's impossible to apparate within the Hogwarts' wards. Not even you-know-who could apparate you away from your bedroom in the castle, Harry."

And she had, of course, been quite right. Harry's heart had swelled

with relief at the truth of it—he was not the weapon, after all! He was an unfortunate person for many reasons—a lone puer, an orphan, a tragedy with a scar—but he was not Lord Voldemort’s potential plaything, and that was the greatest Christmas gift he ever could have asked for.

Once it became clear that Mr. Weasley was going to be just fine, and Harry stopped being such a recluse, Sirius became merrier than Harry had ever seen him.

His cheerfulness at having a house full of people for the Christmas holidays only increased as the days went on - he had taken to decorating Grimmauld Place with gusto, covering the dreary halls with tinsel and lights and even going as far as to put Santa hats on the severed heads of the dead house-elves. Soon, the ancient and most Noble House of Black was hardly recognizable.

He’d also developed the annoying habit of pulling pranks on his only godson. Sirius would drop things directly behind him, making Harry nearly jump out of his skin at the sharp sound (they were always heavy objects that sounded rather like a gun firing off when they hit the floor); he ‘accidentally’ let loose a few doxies in his bedroom when Harry had just woken up and was still groggy (one tried to take his glasses; Harry had to wrestle with it blind); and even once shouted “POTTER!” as loud as he could when Harry was standing right next to his mother’s portrait, thus waking her up and causing her to scream right in his ear (*“Filth! Vile, disgusting traitors in my home!”*). It was like Sirius thought he could illicit a Christmas miracle by simply startling Harry into presenting.

This, of course, did not happen—if Umbridge banning him from Quidditch wasn’t going to cause Harry to spontaneously present, he doubted anything ever would—and was actually beginning to take quite a toll on Harry’s nerves. The attack on Mr. Weasley had been a big enough of an ordeal that Harry had been completely distracted from the fact that he was the last puer of his year, but now that he was well on his way to recovery, he could not get it off his mind—especially when Sirius kept trying to scare him, or would do things like set the seating arrangement at mealtimes so that Harry was always next to either Ginny, Tonks, or both, like he thought being surrounded by omegas would spark to life some dormant alpha magic in him.

Harry was beyond anxious.

The last thing he wanted to do was let his godfather down, but there was no help for it—Harry did not think he would be an alpha. How disappointed would Sirius be, that he, Harry, was not like his father after all?

It was a notion that Harry was having a tough time dealing with. He wanted to talk to someone about it, but wasn't sure who. Certainly no one close to his age; what he wanted was someone like a parent to confide these fears in, and seeing as Sirius was the one he was needing to keep these thoughts from...

It was just after dinner on Christmas Eve—Harry had been seated next to Ginny, across from Tonks—when the realization struck him. Harry stood in a hurry, saying something about needing to go to the bathroom, and caught him just as he was putting on his jacket in the hall.

“Professor Lupin,” Harry said, and Lupin looked up, “Can I, er—can I have a word?”

Harry looked over his shoulder. Sirius was helping Mrs. Weasley gather dinner plates and serve dessert, which Lupin had thankfully opted out of, cheerfully distracted by being a good host. “In private?” he added quietly.

“Of course, Harry,” Lupin said, allowing Harry to lead him down the hall. The nearest room was the spare bedroom that Fred and George were currently using. They ducked inside and closed the door. “Is everything all right?”

Harry knew they probably didn't have much time, so he cut to the chase. “I'm worried about presenting,” he said.

Lupin blinked once in surprise, and then his features softened in understanding. “You have nothing to worry about, Harry,” he said reassuringly. “I know it sounds frightening, becoming an alpha, but I don't think it's so bad. You'll have represent on hand at school, and we have some here, just in case, and—”

“It's not that,” Harry said, immediately irritated and trying to stifle his annoyance. “It's just... Everyone thinks I'm going to be an alpha. And I don't think I am. In fact, I'm pretty positive I'm not.”

Lupin frowned. “Why would you say that?”

“I can... I dunno, I just have a feeling.”

There was a moment of silence, but then Lupin nodded. "...Yes, you know, I think that you are right," he said, to Harry's great surprise.

"You do?"

"Yes. I've thought so for a long time, in fact. You mastered the patronus charm very quickly. I know you're still unrepresented, but still. The way you handled it led me to believe your magic would be more malleable. I think you may be a beta."

Even though this was what Harry had feared, his heart sank to hear it confirmed by someone older and so much wiser than him.

"I don't think that's a bad thing," Lupin said, and now he was smiling. "In fact, I think it's the best thing you could hope for."

"You do?" Harry said again.

"Oh, yes. When I was unrepresented—after your father and Sirius had transpired to be alphas, much to their satisfaction—I prayed every night that I would be a beta."

"Because of how my dad and Sirius acted?" Harry asked shrewdly.

"Partially," Lupin admitted. "But also because of what I am. Magical signatures have a huge impact on those infected with lycanthropy... There is nothing, *nothing* more terrifying than an alpha werewolf in a rut, and they go into ruts *very* easily. They just need to be angry enough, even after they've been magically mature for years. There don't need to be omegas around at all—though an omega in heat would guarantee one, of course. It's horrifying."

Lupin's face took on a dark expression. "Fenrir Greyback was going around targeting children that were likely to be betas, and, when he could get close enough—though he never really could, as they're so rare and protected—omegas... He did his best to not affect males who came from parents of an alpha and an omega though, and he never infects presented males unless they're betas, like that poor chap in St. Mungo's, the one staying in the same room as Arthur... *Fenrir Greyback* is an alpha male, and he quite likes being the most powerful werewolf in his camp. Greyback in a rut is not something that even the most feared Death Eaters would ever want to face. And during a full moon? Or while partially transformed, as he's been learning to do lately? He's a nightmare."

"Is that how it works in werewolf packs, then?" Harry asked, too

curious not to. “Is there an alpha male, and then a hierarchy under him of betas and omegas...?”

Lupin scoffed. “Sort of,” he said. “The idea of the ‘alpha male’ is a myth, Harry—both in wolves and in people. There isn’t one set leader of the pack. In a *real* wolf pack, there is no lone alpha male that runs things, mating with all the females, nothing like that. No, the only reason there is a dictator-like alpha male in Fenrir’s camp is because he’s made it that way. If another werewolf he or someone else has turned ends up presenting as an alpha come into his camp, he kills them, simple as that. He just doesn’t want the competition for power is all.

“Anyway... Obviously, I was relieved to be a beta, and I think you should be too, Harry, if that turns out to be the case. It’s truly better to be a beta.”

“Because betas don’t have to deal with potions and all that?” Harry muttered, recalling Snape’s speech from long ago. It didn’t seem like such a big deal for alphas, needing to take a represent for only a few years...

“That’s the least of it,” said Lupin. “It’s more that alphas are so hot-headed, especially when they’re young. Betas have far more magical fluidity and tend to be much more stable overall. Rational. And the more powerful the alphas are, the wilder they tend to be. That’s how Bellatrix Black was caught, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s an extremely powerful witch, Bellatrix Black... some might even say she’s magically more powerful than you-know-who. But she was *known* for losing control on the battlefield; she’d maim as many of her own people as she would those she was fighting against... When she went to attack the Longbottoms, to question them, thinking they must have known something about her master’s disappearance—though why she would think *they* knew something in the first place is its own mystery—she completely lost control. Couldn’t even stop torturing them to flee. The aurors who brought her in said that she’d bloodied Bartemius and Rodolphus too, the Death Eaters who were with her, and that’s why they were all caught. She’d been so high on a power trip that she damned them all to Azkaban for life.”

Harry felt ill at the thought. Poor Neville; now worse off than an orphan, and all because Bellatrix Black couldn’t control her own

magic...

Maybe being a beta was not such a bad thing after all.

“Was my dad like that?” Harry asked.

Lupin’s sinister expression brightened. “Oh, no, of course not. Bellatrix Black, being a delta, was a very special case. Your father was arrogant, sure, but only because he wanted to show off his magical prowess to certain girls, not kill or maim anyone. That being said... I can’t even count the times that James and Sirius would have flown off the handle on someone if Peter and I hadn’t stopped them. The few times we could, at least. I can only imagine how much worse it would have been if I had been an alpha too!”

“Really?”

“Really. James and Sirius, why, they were always on the lookout for some kind of adventure. They were constantly having a go at Snape, as that *always* guaranteed some drama—though to be fair, Snape regularly tried to hex them too, only in far cleverer ways—and let me tell you, Harry, it didn’t always end well for them. Your father and Sirius were some of the most powerful wizards in our year, that was true, but power isn’t everything. They were easily manipulated; Snape used their short fuses to his advantage, and I was often the voice of reason that kept them from going too far. They may have been stronger, but Snape learned pretty quickly how to hold his own against them... Power, without control, can be just as much of a weakness as it is a boon.”

Harry nodded slowly, his mind reeling. He couldn’t help but think then of words spoken to him long ago, when he was only eleven and the world had seemed much simpler:

There is no good or evil... There is only power, and those too weak to seek it.

Lupin laughed suddenly, like he was envisioning one of the almost-adventures just then. “I remember when your dad presented,” he said wistfully. “It was a few weeks after your mum had turned out to be an omega, in fact. Not long before our O.W.L.’s... I suppose you can blame your late-blooming genes on her. Anyway, we—”

Just then, the door opened. Fred and George were there, and they looked back and forth between Lupin and Harry with their brows raised.

“Are we... interrupting?” Fred asked slowly.

“No, no!” said Lupin. He adjusted his coat and smiled. “Just chatting, sorry to use your room... Bit pressed for space now, aren’t we? But I best be off.”

He clapped Harry on the shoulder. “See you tomorrow evening for Christmas dinner, then. Good night Harry. Fred, George.”

Fred and George watched him go, then cast Harry a suspicious look. “Something on your mind, ickle puer?” George said teasingly.

Before Harry could respond, he was cut off by Sirius’s voice. “Harry! Where’s Harry gone to? I need to show him something...”

Harry rolled his eyes, wondering what exciting new method of scaring him Sirius had come up with. Perhaps he’d found another boggart in the attic, Harry mused darkly. Though at this point, what his boggart might turn into was a toss-up. Harry wasn’t sure if it would be a dementor; a small, eternally magically immature Harry Potter; or himself as a snake, murdering everyone in sight and having a jolly good time doing it.

“Harry!” Sirius called again.

Harry repressed a sigh. “Excuse me, I’m needed elsewhere,” he murmured, pushing past the twins—who, naturally, attracted to the possibility of mischief, followed.

Occlumency

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Christmas day passed with no shortage of excitement and drama. Harry - and consequently Ron, as they were sharing a room - awoke with a jolt to a display of red and green fireworks exploding above their beds in the shapes of wreaths and Christmas trees: Sirius's most dazzling attempt at forcing Harry into a premature presentation.

Harry's godfather was not disappointed when this too failed to have the desired effect. Sirius only laughed, rushing into their room and shouting "Happy Christmas!" as he put out the small fire that had sprung to life on some of the wrapping paper at the foot of Ron's bed. He then ruffled Harry's hair, smiled brightly, and went back into the hall singing some wizarding Christmas carol that Harry had never heard before.

"He almost burned the sweater my mum made me with those fireworks," Ron mumbled, having torn open the package that had, momentarily, caught fire. It was indeed a Weasley sweater, in its usual maroon for Ron. "Shame that he didn't."

They opened their gifts in a hurry. Harry received many excellent presents and a few alarming ones, such as the wallet that Hagrid gave him which tried to bite his fingers off, and a portrait from Dobby that was supposed to be Harry, but more closely resembled a pale, messy-haired troll. Hermione's gift of a talking homework planner (*"If you've dotted the i's and crossed the t's then you may do whatever you please!"*) fell somewhere in between.

Once they'd all had a healthy breakfast, Harry, the Weasley's, Tonks, and Remus all went to St. Mungo's to visit Mr. Weasley. The trip, which should have been a relatively simple outing, made for a far more tragic Christmas than they ever could have suspected. They met not only their old Defense professor, Gilderoy Lockhart, but had the misfortune of running into Neville and his grandmother as well... and Neville's parents.

Suddenly, it was no longer a mystery as to why Neville had spontaneously presented at Draco Malfoy's insensitive display.

“Poor Neville,” Hermione had said once they’d made it back to the tearoom, having finally escaped the vigor of Lockhart forcing dozens of signed photographs on them. “I never knew... No *wonder* he reacted to Malfoy like he did...”

“If *that’s* the kind of thing it takes to make an alpha spontaneously present,” Ron said, giving Harry a dark look, “then Sirius is going to have to do a lot better than some Christmas-themed fireworks.”

The rest of the break passed with much less enthusiasm after Christmas. Sirius became glummer with each passing day as the time for everyone to leave drew nearer, and he seemed to give up any hope that Harry would present in his depression. His dourness was so terrible that Harry almost preferred to be the target of his many pranks, because even though that had been stressful, at least his godfather had been smiling.

Harry did not want to leave Sirius alone in Grimmauld Place with only Kreacher and Buckbeak for company. In fact, if it were not for the DA to look forward to, Harry might have begged to stay with him just so that he would no longer have to deal with Umbridge, the Inquisitorial Squad, and the general whispering about him that only seemed to grow worse with time.

But then, on the very last day of break, something happened which made Harry dread returning to Hogwarts more than he already had.

Occlumency lessons. With *Snape*.

Whatever had he done to deserve such a thing?

When Snape came to inform him, it had been a frightful interaction—not because of anything that Harry said or did, nor Snape himself, but *Sirius*.

Sirius, who had refused to leave the room so that Snape could speak with Harry alone, had become fiercely protective. “If I hear you’re using these Occlumency lessons to give Harry a hard time,” he’d seethed, “you’ll have *me* to answer to.”

“How touching,” Snape had sneered. “But surely you’ve noticed that Potter is very like his father?”

“I have,” said Sirius proudly.

“Well then, you’ll have noticed that criticism simply bounces off him.”

And that had been it. Sirius had whipped out his wand, and even Harry, still unable to sense magic properly, felt the wave of fury that rolled off his alpha godfather. It permeated the room; it caused the chair that Sirius had been sitting in fly into the wall and the lights to flicker. He rounded the table, marching towards Snape, looking deadly in his anger. And though Harry had wanted to shout at him to stop, he’d found himself recoiling away instead, the feeling of Sirius’s magic making his heart speed and his breath quicken, unable to do anything.

Yet Snape, who could sense this magic far more aptly than Harry, had looked unaffected. He’d regarded Sirius’s display of anger with a cool, calculating look.

And maybe something truly awful would have happened, then, if Remus hadn’t rushed into the room, breaking up the interaction. Evidently, Sirius’s magic was powerful enough that it was perceptible far beyond the kitchen. Everyone, Harry later learned, had felt it—upstairs, Ginny had shuddered and nearly screamed; Crookshanks had bolted down the stairs towards Sirius, like he was a knight that had been called to arms. The massive cat had appeared moments after Remus had, yowling and hissing at Snape’s heels as he left in a cold rage.

Harry did his best to gather himself after Snape had gone, despite the fact that Sirius’s fury still rippled all around him. Harry didn’t understand why it affected him as much as it did. He was still a puer. It must not have been the magic he was reacting to, he later concluded, but by the way Sirius had acted. Harry had only seen his godfather so venomous once before, when he was speaking to Pettigrew in the Shrieking Shack... Had he been as stricken then as he was now? Probably, though that was years ago...

Sirius didn’t seem to notice Harry having reacted oddly, though, so Harry told himself that this must be the case. Sirius was just that alarming when he was furious. Hermione and Ron had agreed, saying that his magic had frightened them too - and they had been upstairs, much further away from the interaction.

But Remus had given Harry a curious look afterward, when he was shaking slightly and backed against the wall, and Harry couldn’t rid himself of the feeling that something was wrong with him. It followed him like a shadow all the way back to Hogwarts.

“Oi! Harry!”

Zacharias Smith was rushing towards Harry, Ron, and Hermione as they walked down the hall. It was the very first day back after the winter holiday, and Harry was already tired. He braced himself, already knowing what Zacharias was going to ask.

“When’s our next... you know,” he asked, keeping his voice low. “Will there be one tonight?”

Harry held back a sigh. “I will let you all know when the next one is,” Harry said for about the twelfth time that day. Zacharias was far from the first member of the DA to accost him with that question. “But I can’t tonight, I have—er—Remedial Potions...”

“You have *what*?” Zacharias asked, looking aghast. “Remedial Potions? Good Lord, you must be terrible! Snape doesn’t usually give extra lessons, does he?”

“I guess I’m special,” Harry muttered, feeling his face grow warm.

Zacharias gave him a pitiful look. “Well, good luck with that,” he said. He then strode away in an annoyingly buoyant fashion.

Ron glared after him. “I could still hit him with a hex from here, if you want,” he murmured.

“No, Ron,” Hermione said. “We are *prefects*.”

“He’s a beta though; probably won’t freak anyone out too much—”

“Just forget it,” Harry interrupted. “It’s what everyone is going to think, isn’t it? That I’m just stupid... I’m going for a walk...”

Harry moved quickly enough that Hermione and Ron got the hint, and they didn’t follow him. Harry was careful in his retreat to avoid any other DA members as he went, dodging a very smiley Cho Chang and her friends, as well as Draco Malfoy and his gang of Slytherins, and made it all the way out to the owlery without further incident. He spotted Hedwig at once.

“Here, girl,” he called as he raised his arm, and Hedwig flew down to him at once. She perched herself on the crook of his elbow, hooting softly in his ear.

“I think you’re the only one who doesn’t judge me, Hedwig,” Harry

said morosely. Hedwig only hooted again, her amber eyes wide and knowing as though she understood perfectly.

Later that evening, Harry made his way down to the dungeons—alone. He paused outside Snape’s office when he reached it, wishing he were almost anywhere else. He finally resolved himself, took a deep breath, and knocked.

“Enter,” came Snape’s sneering voice.

It was a shadowy room lined with shelves bearing hundreds of glass jars in which floated slimy bits of animals and plants, suspended in variously colored potions. In a corner stood the cupboard full of ingredients that Snape had once accused Harry—not without reason—of robbing.

Harry’s attention was drawn toward the desk, however, where a shallow stone basin engraved with runes and symbols lay in a pool of candlelight. Harry recognized it at once as Dumbledore’s Pensieve. Wondering what on earth it was doing here, he jumped when Snape spoke again.

“Shut the door behind you, Potter.”

Harry did as he was told with the horrible feeling that he was imprisoning himself as he did. When he turned back to face the room Snape had moved into the light and was pointing silently at the chair opposite his desk—on top of which was a vial full of a familiar-looking liquid.

“Drink that,” Snape said.

Harry stared at the *Masculum Reprimunt* uneasily, but ultimately did as he was told. He didn’t need Snape to explain why he was making him take it, either... but that fact that the Potions Master thought it pertinent to take measures to prevent a potential sporadic rut did not bode well at all for this lesson. Harry swallowed it back reluctantly, then set the vial back on Snape’s desk once it was empty.

“Good,” Snape said. “Now sit.”

Harry did. Snape sat across from him, his cold black eyes fixed unblinkingly upon Harry, dislike etched in every line of his face.

“Well, Potter, you know why you are here,” he said. “The headmaster

has asked me to teach you Occlumency. I can only hope that you prove more adept at it than Potions.”

“Right,” said Harry tersely. The represent still tasted bitter and awful on his tongue.

“This may not be an ordinary class, Potter,” said Snape, his eyes narrowed malevolently, “but I am still your teacher and you will therefore call me ‘sir’ or ‘Professor’ at all times.”

“Yes, *sir*,” said Harry.

“Now, Occlumency. As I told you back in your dear godfather’s kitchen, this branch of magic seals the mind against magical intrusion and influence.”

“And why does Professor Dumbledore think I need it, sir?” said Harry, looking directly into Snape’s dark, cold eyes and wondering whether he would answer.

Snape looked back at him for a moment and then said contemptuously, “Surely even you could have worked that out by now, Potter? The Dark Lord is highly skilled at Legilimency—”

“What’s that? *Sir*?”

“It is the ability to extract feelings and memories from another person’s mind—”

“He can read minds?” said Harry quickly, his worst fears confirmed.

“You have no subtlety, Potter,” said Snape, his dark eyes glittering. “You do not understand fine distinctions. It is one of the shortcomings that makes you such a lamentable potion-maker.”

Snape paused for a moment, apparently to savor the pleasure of insulting Harry, before continuing, “Only Muggles talk of ‘mind reading.’ The mind is not a book, to be opened at will and examined at leisure. Thoughts are not etched on the inside of skulls, to be perused by any invader. The mind is a complex and many-layered thing, Potter... or at least, most minds are...” He smirked. “It is true, however, that those who have mastered Legilimency are able, under certain conditions, to delve into the minds of their victims and to interpret their findings correctly. The Dark Lord, for instance, almost always knows when somebody is lying to him. Only those skilled at Occlumency are able to shut down those feelings and memories that

contradict the lie, and so utter falsehoods in his presence without detection.”

Whatever Snape said, Legilimency sounded like mind reading to Harry and he did not like the sound of it at all.

“So he could know what we’re thinking right now? Sir?”

“The Dark Lord is at a considerable distance and the walls and grounds of Hogwarts are guarded by many ancient spells and charms to ensure the bodily and mental safety of those who dwell within them,” said Snape. “Time and space matter in magic, Potter. Eye contact is often essential to Legilimency.”

“Well then, why do I have to learn Occlumency?”

Snape eyed Harry, tracing his mouth with one long, thin finger as he did so.

“The usual rules do not seem to apply with you, Potter. The curse that failed to kill you seems to have forged some kind of connection between you and the Dark Lord. The evidence suggests that at times, when your mind is most relaxed and vulnerable—when you are asleep, for instance—you are sharing the Dark Lord’s thoughts and emotions. The headmaster thinks it inadvisable for this to continue. He wishes me to teach you how to close your mind to the Dark Lord.”

Harry’s heart was pumping fast again. None of this added up... at least, now in terms of what Dumbledore knew. Did he know of the strange dreams that Harry had of a young Tom Riddle? Of him stumbling upon a handsome, dangerous version of the Dark Lord in the Forbidden Forest, murdering unicorns and then turning to do the same to *him*?

No, he couldn’t know that, Harry told himself, looking down and away from Snape’s bottomless eyes. *I never told anyone that, never would...*

“Why does Professor Dumbledore want to stop it?” Harry asked, pretending as though those frightening dreams of Tom Riddle did not exist. Surely they were just normal nightmares, while the ones where he saw what the Dark Lord saw were something... real. “I don’t like it much, but it’s been useful, hasn’t it? I mean... I saw that snake attack Mr. Weasley and if I hadn’t, Professor

Dumbledore wouldn’t have been able to save him, would he? Sir?”

Harry dared to make eye contact with him again. Snape stared at Harry for a few moments, still tracing his mouth with his finger. When he spoke again, it was slowly and deliberately, as though he weighed every word.

“It appears that the Dark Lord has been unaware of the connection between you and himself until very recently. Up till now it seems that you have been experiencing his emotions and sharing his thoughts without his being any the wiser. However, the vision you had shortly before Christmas—”

“The one with the snake and Mr. Weasley?”

“Do not interrupt me, Potter,” said Snape in a dangerous voice. “As I was saying... the vision you had shortly before Christmas represented such a powerful incursion upon the Dark Lord’s thoughts—”

“I saw inside the snake’s head, not his!”

“I thought I just told you not to interrupt me, Potter?”

But Harry did not care if Snape was angry; at last he seemed to be getting some answers. He had moved forward in his chair so that, without realizing it, he was perched on the very edge, tense as though poised for flight.

“How come I saw through the snake’s eyes if it’s Voldemort’s thoughts I’m sharing?”

“Do not say the Dark Lord’s name!” spat Snape.

There was a nasty silence. They glared at each other across the Pensieve.

“Professor Dumbledore says his name,” said Harry quietly.

“Dumbledore is an extremely powerful wizard,” Snape muttered. “While *he* may feel secure enough to use the name... the rest of us...” He rubbed his left forearm, apparently unconsciously, on the spot where Harry knew the Dark Mark was burned into his skin.

“I just wanted to know,” Harry began again, forcing his voice back to politeness, “why —”

“You seem to have visited the snake’s mind because that was where the Dark Lord was at that particular moment,” snarled Snape. “He was

possessing the snake at the time and so you dreamed you were inside it too...”

“And Vol—he—realized I was there?”

“It seems so,” said Snape coolly.

“How do you know?” said Harry urgently. “Is this just Professor Dumbledore guessing, or—?”

“I told you,” said Snape, rigid in his chair, his eyes slits, “to call me ‘sir.’”

“Yes, sir,” said Harry impatiently, “but how do you know—?”

“It is enough that we know,” said Snape repressively. “The important point is that the Dark Lord is now aware that you are gaining access to his thoughts and feelings. He has also deduced that the process is likely to work in reverse; that is to say, he has realized that he might be able to access your thoughts and feelings in return—”

“And he might try and make me do things?” asked Harry, panic rising in his chest. “*Sir?*” he added hurriedly.

“He might,” said Snape, sounding cold and unconcerned. “Which brings us back to Occlumency.”

Snape pulled out his wand from an inside pocket of his robes and Harry tensed in his chair, but Snape merely raised the wand to his temple and placed its tip into the greasy roots of his hair. When he withdrew it, some silvery substance came away, stretching from temple to wand like a thick gossamer strand, which broke as he pulled the wand away from it and fell gracefully into the Pensieve, where it swirled silvery white, neither gas nor liquid. Twice more Snape raised the wand to his temple and deposited the silvery substance into the stone basin, then, without offering any explanation of his behavior, he picked up the Pensieve carefully, removed it to a shelf out of their way and returned to face Harry with his wand held at the ready.

“Stand up and take out your wand, Potter.”

Harry got to his feet, feeling nervous. They faced each other with the desk between them.

“You may use your wand to attempt to disarm me, or defend yourself in any other way you can think of,” said Snape.

“And what are you going to do?” Harry asked, eyeing Snape’s wand apprehensively.

“I am about to attempt to break into your mind,” said Snape softly. “We are going to see how well you resist. I have been told that you have already shown aptitude at resisting the Imperius Curse. You will find that similar powers are needed for this. Brace yourself, now... *Legilimens!*”

Snape had struck before Harry was ready, before Harry had even begun to summon any force of resistance: the office swam in front of his eyes and vanished, image after image was racing through his mind like a flickering film so vivid it blinded him to his surroundings...

He was five, watching Dudley riding a new red bicycle, and his heart was bursting with jealousy...

He was nine, and Ripper the bulldog was chasing him up a tree and the Dursleys were laughing below on the lawn...

He was sitting under the Sorting Hat, and it was telling him he would do well in Slytherin...

Hermione was lying in the hospital wing, her face covered with thick black hair...

A hundred dementors were closing in on him beside the dark lake...

A young Dark Lord was advancing on him, his lips coated in shimmering silver as he smiled—

No, no—not that you can't see that, no—!

He felt a sharp pain in his knee. Snape’s office had come back into view and he realized that he had fallen to the floor; one of his knees had collided painfully with the leg of Snape’s desk. He looked up at Snape, who had lowered his wand and was rubbing his wrist. There was an angry weal there, like a scorch mark.

“Did you mean to produce a Stinging Hex?” asked Snape coolly.

“No,” said Harry bitterly, getting up from the floor.

“I thought not,” said Snape contemptuously. “You let me get in too far. You lost control.”

“Did you see everything I saw?” Harry asked, unsure whether he

wanted to hear the answer.

“Flashes of it,” said Snape, his lip curling. “To whom did the dog belong?”

“My Aunt Marge,” Harry muttered, hating Snape.

“Well, for a first attempt that was not as poor as it might have been,” said Snape, raising his wand once more. “You managed to stop me eventually, though you wasted time and energy shouting. You must remain focused. Repel me with your brain and you will not need to resort to your wand.”

“I’m trying,” said Harry angrily, “but you’re not telling me how!”

“Manners, Potter,” said Snape dangerously. “Now, I want you to close your eyes.”

Harry threw him a filthy look before doing as he was told. He did not like the idea of standing there with his eyes shut while Snape faced him, carrying a wand.

“Clear your mind, Potter,” said Snape’s cold voice. “Let go of all emotion...”

But Harry’s anger at Snape continued to pound through his veins like venom. Let go of his anger? He could as easily remove his head.

“You’re not doing it, Potter. You will need more discipline than this. Focus, now...”

Harry tried to empty his mind, tried not to think, or remember, or feel...

“Let’s go again. On the count of three. One —two—three—*Legilimens!*”

A great black dragon was rearing in front of him...

His father and mother were waving at him out of an enchanted mirror...

Cedric Diggory was lying on the ground with blank eyes staring at him
—

“No!”

Harry was on his knees again, his face buried in his hands, his brain

aching as though someone had been trying to pull it from his skull.

“Get up!” said Snape sharply. “Get up! You are not trying, you are making no effort, you are allowing me access to memories you fear, handing me weapons!”

Harry stood up again, his heart thumping wildly as though he had really just seen Cedric dead in the graveyard. Snape looked paler than usual, and angrier, though not nearly as angry as Harry was.

“I —am—making—an—effort,” he said through clenched teeth.

“I told you to empty yourself of emotion!”

“Yeah? Well, I’m finding that hard at the moment,” Harry snarled.

“Then you will find yourself easy prey for the Dark Lord!” said Snape savagely. “Fools who wear their hearts proudly on their sleeves, who cannot control their emotions, who wallow in sad memories and allow themselves to be provoked this easily—weak people, in other words—they stand no chance against his powers! He will penetrate your mind with absurd ease, Potter! As easily as he does with every alpha who is unable to control themselves and their magic!”

Harry blinked at that, curiosity bubbling up through the sheer outrage. “Is it harder?” he asked. “For... for alphas to learn Occlumency?”

“Typically, yes,” Snape sneered. “It is found that alpha magic is more inclined towards Legilimency—offensive mental magic. Occlumency requires control. Alphas, especially while young, rarely have the capability... this is why the Headmaster found it imperative that I work with you now.”

Harry glared. “Is it? Well then,” he said, “I suppose it’s a good thing I’m not anything at all yet.”

“Indeed. Yet unrepresented or not, you are an immature wizard already demonstrating an extreme lack of self-control,” Snape said. “It is *weakness*.”

“I am not weak,” said Harry in a low voice, fury now pumping through him so that he thought he might attack Snape in a moment. He almost wished he would spontaneously present after all—though he knew the represent Snape had made him take was preventing that possibility.

“Then prove it! Master yourself!” spat Snape. “Control your anger, discipline your mind! We shall try again! Get ready, now! *Legilimens!*”

He was watching Uncle Vernon hammering the letter box shut...

A hundred dementors were drifting across the lake in the grounds toward him...

He was running along a windowless passage with Mr. Weasley... They were drawing nearer to the plain black door at the end of the corridor... Harry expected to go through it, but Mr. Weasley led him off to the left, down a flight of stone steps...

“I KNOW! I KNOW!”

He was on all fours again on Snape’s office floor, his scar was prickling unpleasantly, but the voice that had just issued from his mouth was triumphant. He pushed himself up again to find Snape staring at him, his wand raised. It looked as though, this time, Snape had lifted the spell before Harry had even tried to fight back.

“What happened then, Potter?” he asked, eyeing Harry intently.

“I saw—I remembered,” Harry panted. “I’ve just realized...”

“Realized what?” asked Snape sharply.

Harry did not answer at once; he was still savoring the moment of blinding realization as he rubbed his forehead.

He had been dreaming about a windowless corridor ending in a locked door for months, without once realizing that it was a real place. Now, seeing the memory again, he knew that all along he had been dreaming about the corridor down which he had run with Mr. Weasley on the twelfth of August as they hurried to the courtrooms in the Ministry. It was the corridor leading to the Department of Mysteries, and Mr. Weasley had been there the night that he had been attacked by Voldemort’s snake.

He looked up at Snape. “What’s in the Department of Mysteries?”

“What did you say?” Snape asked quietly and Harry saw, with deep satisfaction, that Snape was unnerved.

“I said, what’s in the Department of Mysteries, *sir*?” Harry said.

“And why,” said Snape slowly, “would you ask such a thing?”

“Because,” said Harry, watching Snape closely for a reaction, “that corridor I’ve just seen—I’ve been dreaming about it for months. I’ve just recognized it; it leads to the Department of Mysteries. And I think Voldemort wants something from—”

“I have told you not to say the Dark Lord’s name!”

They glared at each other. Harry’s scar seared again, but he did not care. Snape looked agitated. When he spoke again he sounded as though he was trying to appear cool and unconcerned.

“There are many things in the Department of Mysteries, Potter, few of which you would understand and none of which concern you, do I make myself plain?”

“Yes,” Harry said, still rubbing his prickling scar, which was becoming more painful.

“I want you back here same time on Wednesday, and we will continue work then.”

“Fine,” said Harry. He was desperate to get out of Snape’s office and find Ron and Hermione.

“You are to rid your mind of all emotion every night before sleep—empty it, make it blank and calm, you understand?”

“Yes,” said Harry, who was barely listening.

“And be warned, Potter. I shall know if you have not practiced...”

“Right,” Harry mumbled. He picked up his schoolbag, swung it over his shoulder, and hurried toward the office door. As he opened it he glanced back at Snape, who had his back to Harry and was scooping his own thoughts out of the Pensieve with the tip of his wand and replacing them carefully inside his own head. Harry left without another word, closing the door behind him, his scar still throbbing painfully.

Harry found Ron and Hermione in the library, where they were working on Umbridge’s most recent ream of homework. Other students, nearly all of them fifth years, sat at lamp-lit tables nearby, noses close to books, quills scratching feverishly, while the sky outside the mullioned windows grew steadily blacker.

The only other sound was the slight squeaking of one of Madam

Pince's shoes as the librarian prowled the aisles menacingly, breathing down the necks of those touching her precious books.

Harry felt shivery; his scar was still aching, he felt almost feverish. When he sat down opposite Ron and Hermione he caught sight of himself in the window opposite. He was very white, and his scar seemed to be showing up more clearly than usual.

"How did it go?" Hermione whispered, and then, looking concerned, "Are you all right, Harry?"

"Yeah... fine. I dunno," said Harry impatiently, wincing as pain shot through his scar again. "Listen . . . I've just realized something..."

Harry told them what he had just seen and deduced.

"So, are you saying," whispered Ron when he was done, "that the weapon—the thing You-Know-Who's after—is in the Ministry of Magic?"

"In the Department of Mysteries, it's got to be," Harry whispered. "I saw that door when your dad took me down to the courtrooms for my hearing and it's definitely the same one he was guarding when the snake bit him."

Hermione let out a long, slow sigh. "Of course," she breathed.

"Of course what?" said Ron rather impatiently.

"Ron, think about it. Sturgis Podmore was trying to get through a door at the Ministry of Magic. It must have been that one, it's too much of a coincidence!"

"How come Sturgis was trying to break in when he's on our side?" said Ron.

"Well, I don't know," Hermione admitted. "That is a bit odd..."

"So what's in the Department of Mysteries?" Harry asked Ron. "Has your dad ever mentioned anything about it?"

"I know they call the people who work in there 'Unspeakables,'" said Ron, frowning. "Because no one really seems to know what they do in there. Weird place to have a weapon..."

"It's not weird at all, it makes perfect sense," said Hermione. "It will be something top secret that the Ministry has been developing, I

expect... Harry, are you sure you're all right?"

For Harry had just run both his hands hard over his forehead as though trying to iron it.

"Yeah... fine..." he said, lowering his hands, which were trembling. "I just feel a bit... I don't like Occlumency much..."

"I expect anyone would feel shaky if they'd had their mind attacked over and over again," said Hermione sympathetically. "Look, let's get back to the common room, we'll be a bit more comfortable there..."

But the common room was packed and full of shrieks of laughter and excitement; Fred and George were demonstrating their latest bit of joke shop merchandise.

"Headless Hats!" shouted George, as Fred waved a pointed hat decorated with a fluffy pink feather at the watching students. "Two Galleons each—watch Fred, now!"

Fred swept the hat onto his head, beaming. For a second he merely looked rather stupid, then both hat and head vanished.

Several girls screamed, but everyone else was roaring with laughter.

"And off again!" shouted George, and Fred's hand groped for a moment in what seemed to be thin air over his shoulder; then his head reappeared as he swept the pink-feathered hat from it again.

"How do those hats work, then?" said Hermione, distracted from her homework and watching Fred and George. "I mean, obviously it's some kind of Invisibility Spell, but it's rather clever to have extended the field of invisibility beyond the boundaries of the charmed object... I'd imagine the charm wouldn't have a very long life though..."

Harry did not answer; he was still feeling ill.

"I'm going to have to do this tomorrow," he muttered, pushing the books he had just taken out of his bag back inside it.

"Well, write it in your homework planner then!" said Hermione encouragingly. "So you don't forget!"

Harry and Ron exchanged looks as he reached into his bag, withdrew the planner and opened it tentatively.

"Don't leave it till later, you big second-rater!" chided the book as Harry

scribbled down Umbridge's homework. Hermione beamed at it.

"I think I'll go to bed," said Harry, stuffing the homework planner back into his bag and making a mental note to drop it in the fire the first opportunity he got.

He walked across the common room, dodging George, who tried to put a Headless Hat on him, and reached the peace and cool of the stone staircase to the boys' dormitories. He was feeling sick again, just as he had the night he had had the vision of the snake, but thought that if he could just lie down for a while he would be all right.

He opened the door of his dormitory and was one step inside it when he experienced pain so severe he thought that someone must have sliced into the top of his head. He did not know where he was, whether he was standing or lying down, he did not even know his own name—

Maniacal laughter was ringing in his ears... He was happier than he had been in a very long time...

Jubilant, ecstatic, triumphant... A wonderful, wonderful thing had happened...

"Harry? Harry!"

Someone had hit him around the face. The insane laughter was punctuated with a cry of pain. The happiness was draining out of him, but the laughter continued... He opened his eyes and as he did so, he became aware that the wild laughter was coming out of his own mouth. The moment he realized this, it died away; Harry lay panting on the floor, staring up at the ceiling, the scar on his forehead throbbing horribly. Ron was bending over him, looking very worried.

"What happened?" he said.

"I... dunno..." Harry gasped, sitting up again. "He's really happy... really happy..."

"You-Know-Who is?"

"Something good's happened," mumbled Harry. He was shaking as badly as he had done after seeing the snake attack Mr. Weasley and felt very sick. "Something he's been hoping for."

The words came, just as they had back in the Gryffindor changing

room, as though a stranger was speaking them through Harry's mouth, yet he knew they were true. He took deep breaths, willing himself not to vomit all over Ron. He was very glad that Dean and Seamus were not here to watch this time.

"Hermione told me to come and check on you," said Ron in a low voice, helping Harry to his feet. "She says your defenses will be low at the moment, after Snape's been fiddling around with your mind... Still, I suppose it'll help in the long run, won't it?"

He looked doubtfully at Harry as he helped him toward his bed. Harry nodded without any conviction and slumped back on his pillows, aching all over from having fallen to the floor so often that evening, his scar still prickling painfully. He could not help feeling that his first foray into Occlumency had weakened his mind's resistance rather than strengthening it, and he wondered, with a feeling of great trepidation, what had happened to make Lord Voldemort the happiest he had been in fourteen years.

Chapter End Notes

I know this one had a lot of rehashing of canon, slowly integrating the A/B/O stuff - should only be a few more chapters like that, and then everything will be different. :)

End Notes

This is a re-boot of a fic I started a long time ago and took down, 'Enticingly' (I shortened the title because I thought the old one was too long and obnoxious).

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!